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DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE

SEPT.

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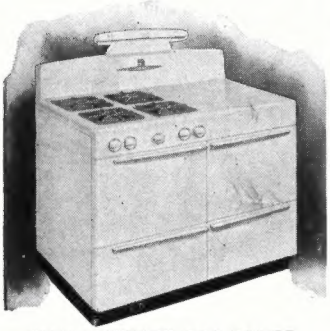

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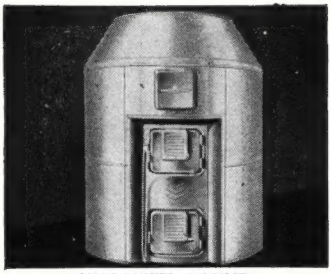

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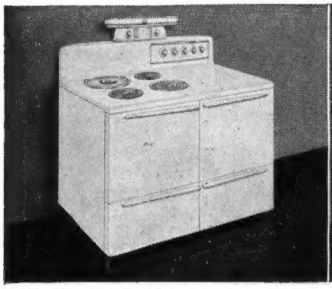

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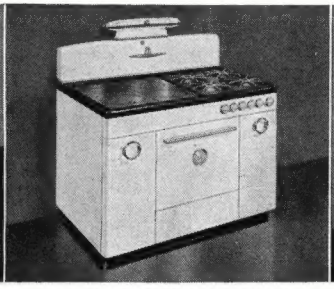

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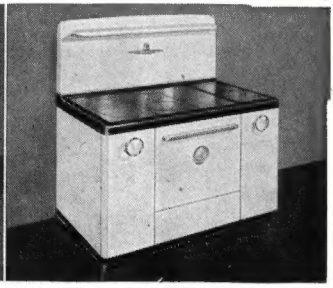

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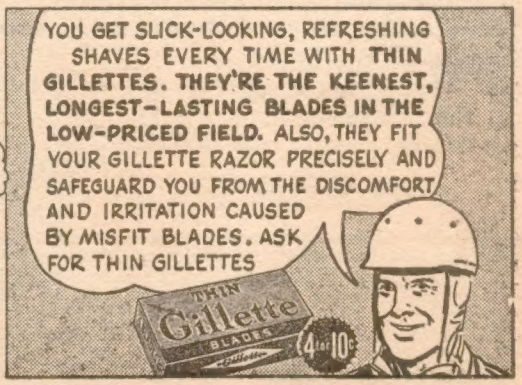
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WESTERN MAGAZINE

OCTOBER ISSUE PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 4TH!

VOLUME XLVII SEPTEMBER, 1946 NUMBER 1

Three Complete Western Novels

Decoys of the Diablito Death-Watch.....Walt Coburn 10
Platte Belton's last court of appeal before he hit that sandy gringo grave, was the Black River sheriff, who himself had detailed Belton to ride the Diablito Death-Watch!

B-Bar Baker's Gun-Bluff.....Marvin De Vries 42
The boss of the Bar-13 wasn't a miser when it came to a round of drinks for the house or a buck for a drifting hand. And when a tinhorn shyster prodded him around—he sure as hell wasn't tightfisted with death!

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Hard-Hitting Cattle-Town Novelette

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When Brett Tyler cast his first vote he'd become a man—and a Judas to the dad who had died, so that Brett might live to rise again and fight!

Two Thrilling Short Frontier Stories

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Tensleep—Colt Cavalier!.....Bart Cassidy 57
Fists, knives, and bullets: Tensleep Maxon could take them all. But women meant real double-trouble!

—And—

Don't Tread on Texas!.....Gene Kivett 8
Texas was invaded in 1915—and General Pizano never got over it!

Frontiersmen Who Made History.....Cedric W. Windas 63
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Dublin—Lone Star Heller!.....Harry Van Demark 78
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In the Saddle.....A Department 6
Maybe, pard, a miner's court could solve today's problems, pronto!

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS

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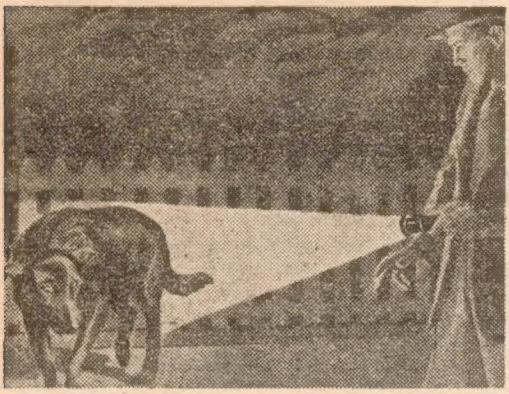
1 The fact that 999 dogs out of a thousand are friendly, safe and lovable doesn't alter the fact that occasionally—through mistreatment, neglect or disease—a dog *may* turn vicious. Such animals are dangerous. Especially at *night!* If cornered—

2 Outdoors, at night, turn on your "Eveready" flashlight! Shine it directly at the dog's eyes, to blind and perhaps bewilder him. He may leap at the light, however; so don't hold it in front of you. Hold it at arm's length to the side.



3 Keep still. Don't move. It's instinctive with most animals to attack anything that runs away or moves aggressively. If the dog refrains from attacking for a few seconds, you have probably won—he is apt to growl at the light, then slink off.

4 For *bright* light, *white* light, *effective* light—insist on "Eveready" batteries. For "Eveready" batteries have no equals—that's why they're the *largest-selling* flashlight batteries in the world. Yet their extra light, extra life, cost you *nothing* extra!

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IN THE SADDLE

THE Old-Timer tossed another mesquite log on the campfire, rested back on his knobby elbows, and squinted reflectively into the crackling flames.

"Yessir," he declared, "what this here modern world needs is less fuss an' feathers in these here international tri-bunals, and a little straight-shootin' Miners' Law.

He packed a stubby pipe with Miner's Delight and leaned back again. "Wasn't no appeal from miners' law," he rambled on, "but the decisions was always fair, becuz there was plenty of give an' take. Both sides had to give up somethin'—an' did—but that's how disputes was ironed out.

"I mind a case where a half-dozen fellers was workin' a claim in the bed of a crick. They'd dug a race to turn the water, so's they could work the ground, when other men in the same diggin's started puttin' up a squawk. Seemed if the water was turned, the claims of these other fellers would be plumb flooded."

The Old-Timer's blue eyes thoughtfully studied the spurting flames. "Well," he went on, "the augerment was gittin' jest nowheres, so the boys decided to take 'er to court, which in them days meant a miners' jury.

"About a hundred men showed up at the appointed time, and the opposin' parties tossed fer first pick of a jury. Finally six jurymen was selected, and while the jury squatted on a pile of slag, a spokesman fer the plaintiffs put up his side o' the case, callin' witnesses and makin' it all legal-like, jest like one o' them swaller-tailed lawyer fellers would. Then come the defendants, doin' likewise, after which the jury inspected the site under dispute, called some witnesses of their own, and then retired to reach a verdict."

The Old-Timer knocked the dottle out of his pipe, and thumbed in a fresh wad of Miner's Delight. "The jury's final verdict," he resumed, "was that the fellers along the race should be given six days to work out their claims, an' then the water would be turned. Neither of them disputin' parties acted like they was 'specially tickled over the verdict—which was a purty good sign it was a fair one. But they wasn't no higher court to appeal to, and if the jury hadn't been obeyed, the miners would'a' seen to it right smart that it was carried out. Like I said, they wasn't much fuss an' feathers to a miners' court, but they wasn't no humbug about it either, and usually everybody was satisfied even when they didn't admit it."

We pondered the Old-Timer's words thoughtfully. And we couldn't help wondering, if world governments today had as simple a system of settling disputes, whether international rivalries and social injustices generally would not disappear from the earth.

Well, maybe! But it appears the world is far from Utopia. Perhaps Providence, in its obscure majesty, has decreed that as long as men are on earth they shall strive for the stars—and never reach them!

The bitter, unending fight for security for himself and his loved ones is man's real and only heritage. How he goes about it is left to him; he is controlled only by the State and God.

The West that has all but vanished was a great stage where good men and bad pursued that heritage to the thunder of a rising nation. How they lived, played, fought and died, is history—history fictionized in this and other magazines in an attempt to resurrect those golden, glorious days. It is *Dime Western's* business—and often its pleasure—to bring to the America of today the America of yesterday. We have the writers to do it: Walt Coburn, Thomas Thompson, Marvin L. DeVries and others who, because of their profession, are mirrors of the last Frontier.

October *Dime* goes on sale Sept. 4th!

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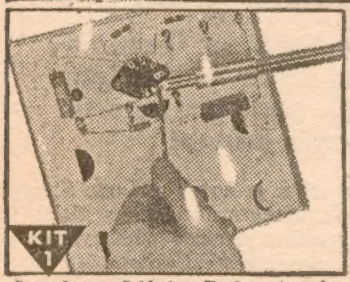
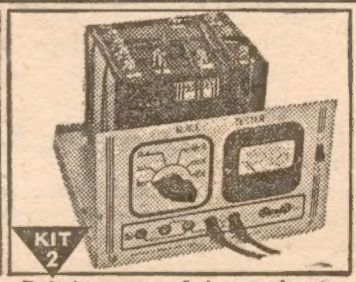
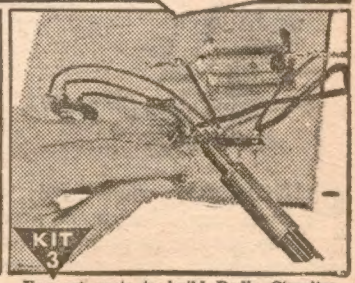


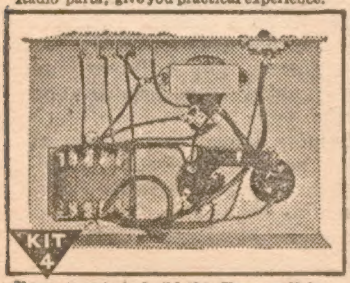
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



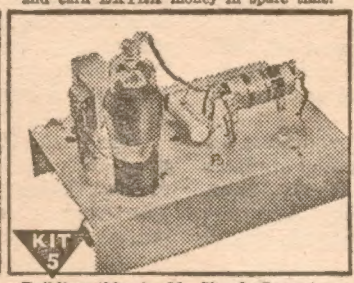
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



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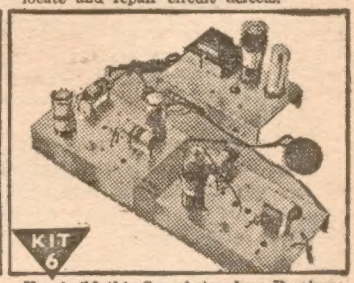

You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

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DON'T TREAD ON TEXAS!

By

GENE KIVETT

It was a bad day, indeed, for General Pizano, when he and his sixty invaders of Texas let go with their sixguns in "Operation Norris Ranch!"

SINCE 1836, when hardy, straight-shooting Texans wrested what is now the Lone Star State from Mexico and proclaimed her an independent republic, many an ambitious Mexican general has looked north across the Rio Grande with eyes that gleamed with avarice and vengeance. Several of these military leaders have dreamed of crossing the Border with an army and recapturing Texas for the mother country.

One of them, the fanatical General Aniceto Pizano, was not content merely to dream of this ambitious conquest. In August of 1915, with a band of sixty-one men, Pizano actually invaded Texas for the purpose of capture and annexation!

For a long time Pizano tried to interest his brother officers and several influential civilians in his plan to invade rich and fertile Texas. But nobody would listen to him. Everyone laughed at his idea and pointed out the absurd folly of such an adventure.

But Pizano was undaunted. He decided he would attempt the coup alone. He would raise a force of brave *caballeros*, dash north and strike San Antonio. Then he would swoop on to Austin. With these two cities under his control, he would strike other towns until he had conquered all of Texas. After that he would capture New Mexico, perhaps California, also!

Pizano had little difficulty raising an army of sixty-one men. He could have recruited more, but he figured sixty-one Mexicans were enough to overwhelm Texas.

On a hot August day, Pizano and his heavily-armed cut-throats crossed the Border near San Benito. Moving swiftly, they rode northward for thirty miles to the Norris ranch, and there struck the first blow of the campaign. They shot up the place, wounded two cowboys and took several horses to replace their own nags.

Meantime, word that the band had invaded American territory had reached the Ranger headquarters in Austin. General Henry Hutchings immediately wired Captains Henry Ransom and J. Monroe Fox to report with their companies to the Norris ranch. Ransom started from Brownsville with ten men; Fox left Marfa with eighteen. The Adjutant himself took a few rangers from headquarters and headed for the scene.

The Texas Rangers joined their forces at the Norris ranch. They learned that the invaders had ridden off in a southwestern direction. The Rangers, totaling thirty-five men, struck out on the trail of the Mexicans. They rode rapidly, followed the tracks of the invaders for several miles. Then the Texans saw where the Mexicans had doubled back.

The Rangers wheeled around, spurred toward the ranch. Their guess had been right. The lawmen overtook the tatterdemalion army in the Norris ranch yard.

Whipping out their rifles and six-shooters, the Texans blasted a deadly volley into the ranks of the invaders. Twelve of them tumbled from their mounts, dead. The remaining Mexicans fired a few ineffectual shots at the Rangers, then turned tail and fled.

Probably the most one-sided running fight ever to occur in Texas was fought that afternoon. The Rangers dogged the heels of the fleeing invaders like a pack of wolves trailing a herd of antelope.

For several years afterward, skeletons of the invaders could be seen scattered along the thirty-mile stretch between the Norris ranch and the Rio Grande.

When finally Pizano raced across the Border into his own country, ten of his original army were with him. The Rangers had killed fifty. Not one Ranger was wounded.

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1						11						23						27b					
1a						12						23a						27c					
1b						13						23b						27d					
1c						14						23c						28					
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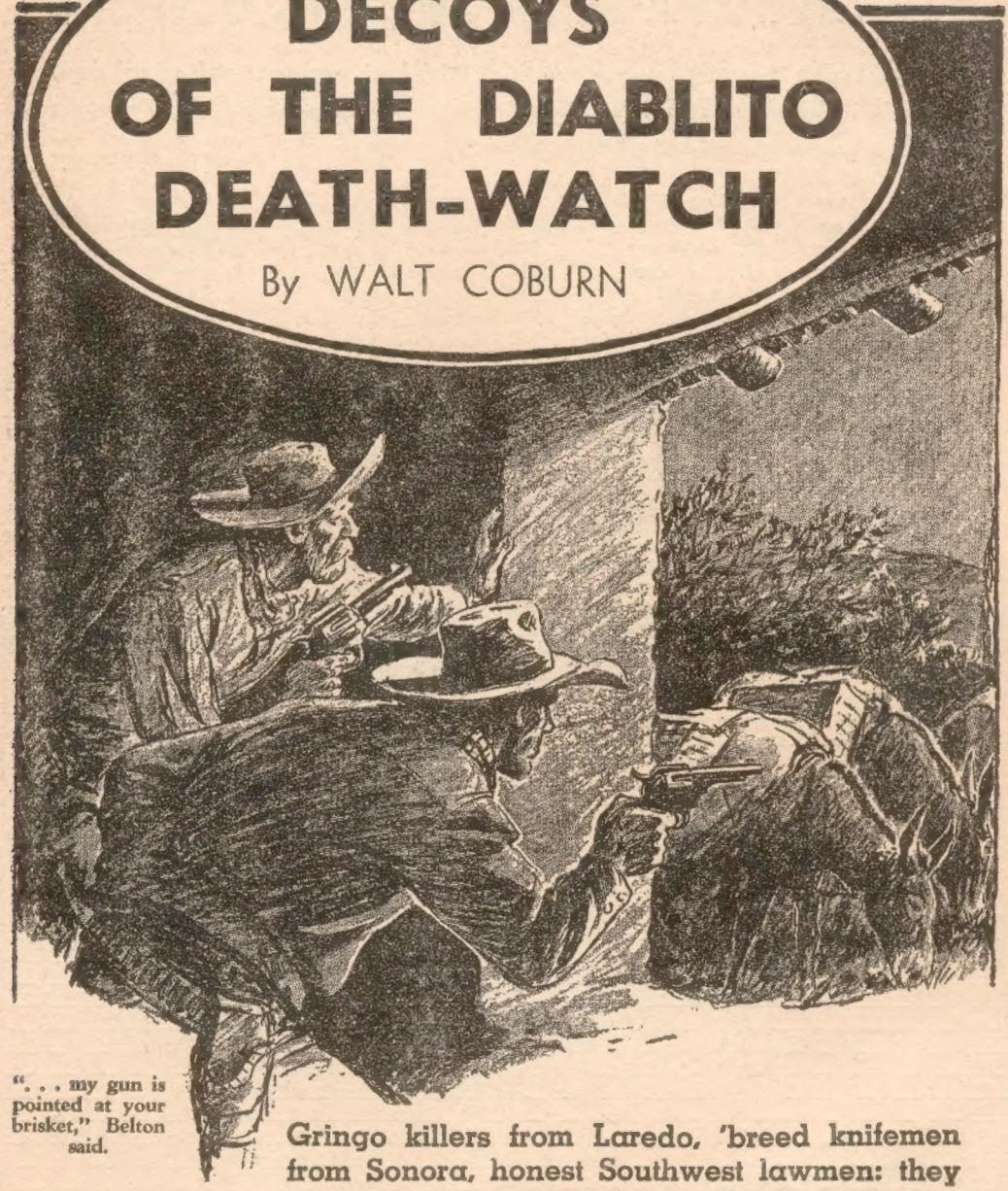
DECOYS OF THE DIABLITO DEATH-WATCH

By WALT COBURN



"... my gun is pointed at your brisket," Belton said.

Gringo killers from Laredo, 'breed knifemen from Sonora, honest Southwest lawmen: they all knew and dreaded the Diablito country, graveyard of the Mexican Border. But into that desert of the damned rode Platte Belton from Montana, knowing that neither man, beast, nor death could stop him from keeping a five-year-old blood pledge!

Dynamic Novel of Quick-Death Border Outlaws

CHAPTER ONE

Diablito Pilgrim

A MAN could get lost in the Diablitos. The Diablitos were brushy little broken foothills straddling the Mexican Border for twenty miles. Cholla cactus patched the dry washes and *arroyaderos* where flash floods had cut deep gullies, now dry and filled with sand. Blind trails led a stranger into the dead ends of boxed cliffs. There was water if you knew where to find the hidden springs that trickled out of the rimrocks and were blotted up in a hundred yards by the parched desert. On hot days the little whirlwinds sucked the yellow sand into spiraling vortex that twisted upward in the sky. Sometimes there would be half a dozen of these miniature cyclones visible at the same time.

Diablitos, the Mexicans called them: little dust devils. It took a well trained eye to spot the dust kicked up by a drive of stolen cattle or horses and tell it apart from the diablitos. The old-timers among the Border Patrol no longer sweated their horses in vain pursuit of the diablitos. The greener hands soon learned, when they pulled up sweating, cursing the Diablitos and the renegades who used the land as a playground for their dangerous sport of hide-and-find with the law officers. The Diablitos, with its twisting trails and broken

hills, its brush and cactus, was a smugglers' and rustlers' Paradise. The bleached bones of dead cattle and horses, and men who had ridden their final trail, littered this back yard of hell. Buzzards and varmints cleaned the meat from scattered bones. And the Diablitos kept their secrets. A man could get lost forever in the Diablitos. . . .

And Platte Belton was lost. Belton, from Montana, was a stranger here in a strange land. It was getting dark, and his horse was gaunt and marked with dried sweat, and leg-weary and discouraged. Belton sagged, stoop-shouldered, in his three-quarter rigged Miles City saddle. His wiry black hair was matted with sweat and yellow dust grimed into the roots of the black stubble that covered his blunt jaw.

From under the heavy black brows that almost met above the short stubby nose, his blue eyes were bloodshot and slitted from squinting into the sun. His shirt and denim brush jumper were rimmed with salty crusted sweat marks under the arms. The brim of a stained Stetson hat flopped wearily. Husky shoulders that wedged down to a lean hard belly and flanks and saddle-muscled legs had the droop of intense fatigue. The lips of his wide, square-cornered mouth were dry and sun cracked. He was more thirsty than hungry and he'd eaten his last meal yesterday. But it was his horse that worried Platte Belton. He hated to ask anything more from a game-hearted played-out horse.

The sandy trail made a turn around the end of a brushy ridge and he caught the light of a campfire in the dusk. Saddled horses were standing around. Cowhands squatted about the supper fire, their tin plates piled with grub and big battered cups filled to the brim with strong black round-up coffee. These men wore faded denim levis jumpers and overalls, brush-scarred chaps, high-priced Stetson hats pulled out of shape and sweat stained around the base of the crown. Carbines rode in saddle scabbards and running irons in smaller scabbards. Around their middles the men wore buckled cartridge belts and six-shooters. There was a dutch oven pack outfit. Pack saddles and rawhide kyack boxes. Camped on feed and water, they were like any ordinary brush-popper greasy sack cow outfit working the broken country on a general round-up.

THERE was something sinister, tough and hard-bitten about these men and the way they eyed Platte Belton as he rode up on his leg-weary horse. When he reined to a halt and sat his saddle with both gloved hands on the horn, they looked him over, cold-eyed and suspicious. No man spoke for a long moment and nobody invited the stranger to get down. They were sizing him up, and Platte Belton sat his horse and never flinched or squirmed under the hard scrutiny of the six cowhands.

A big man with reddish hair and whiskers tossed an empty tin cup into the dishpan and reached for tobacco and papers in his jumper pocket as he squatted on spurred boot heels. He twisted the cigarette into shape, licked it, lit it, then blew out the match flame he held cupped in one big thorn-scabbed, red-tufted hand. His face was long, lean and hawk-beaked, and his mouth was a thin-lipped slit. His pale eyes were like green glass.

"You might as well step down." His rasping voice came out with the drifting tobacco smoke. His green eyes slid a quick glance across the other men squatted around the supper fire.

"Any you boys know 'im?"

Nobody gave the big man answer. None knew Platte Belton, from Montana. So there was no use wasting words about it. Among themselves they would talk when they had anything to say. But with a stranger they were silent, suspicious and wary. They looked ugly to Platte Belton right now, as he swung from his saddle.

That was about what he expected anyhow, here in the Diablitos. Long before, Platte Belton had heard yarns about the Diablitos and the renegades who claimed that broken strip of Mexican Border range. During the day he had sighted the little diablito cyclones that twisted up from the dry washes. And he had a notion that men moving cattle or horses had stirred up one or two of the dust devils that rose into thin air and vanished as if by some conjurer's trick in the sun-baked Arizona desert air.

The big red-whiskered man and the others saw the blotched brand on Platte Belton's line-backed dun horse.

"I swapped for that geldin' yesterday," he enlightened them, "at the Pitchfork ranch." And he volunteered a little more information that might save him being questioned about himself. "I always had a hankerin'," he said, "since I was a button, to go to Mexico. That's where I'm headed."

A short, heavy-shouldered, pot-gutted man who wore the only black hat in the outfit, looked up. He had a splayed nose, and a bone-white knife scar ridged one cheek. His hair was as black as the mane of a horse. His eyes were opaque black and deep set under crooked black brows. There was a part-Injun look about him. Or part Mexican. He was spiking his coffee from a pint beer bottle partly filled with colorless tequila. He had shoveled a fork full of pinto frijole beans into his mouth and he chewed open mouthed. His teeth were white as a china doorknob.

"You shore picked a hell of a route!" His voice had a Spanish accent. "And a hell of

a time to travel it, eh, Sorrel?" He grinned at the big red-whiskered man.

"Mebby he done it a-purpose," said a slim, pale-eyed, tow-headed cowboy with the dirty yellow sparse beard of youth. He was lantern-jawed, and his skin was muddy colored, and when he grinned he showed filmed and stained buck teeth. He looked young, ornery mean—and treacherous.

The others said nothing. They stayed back in the shadow, away from the firelight. The big man—Sorrel—got to his feet. He looked nearly seven feet tall, rawboned, rawhide-muscled. He stood hipshot, thumbs hooked in his slanted cartridge belt. His old leather chaps were saddle warped. He was scowling, as though puzzling out something in his mind.

"Turn your horse loose, stranger," Sorrel said. "Then take the wrinkles outa your belly. This is as far as you go—till you git orders. I'm short handed fer a cook."

A cowpuncher, wearing a dirty floursack apron, jerked it off and waved a long pothook in a sort of gesture of surrender, a faint grin on his tanned face. He was medium built, with puckered blue eyes and blunt features.

"There's no money in it," he said, "and you don't have much fun. But you're learnin' a trade. And every man should learn a trade besides punchin' cows, Paw used to tell me when I was a boy." He made Platte Belton a present of the floursack apron and pothook. His grin was infectious.

Of all this hard-looking renegade outfit, he was the only one who had the look of a man you could trust with your back turned.

"I didn't know," the buck-toothed towhead said, "you had a paw, Sandy." His pale eyes slid sideways. "Braggin', ain't yuh?"

SANDY swung the long-handled pot hook. Its curved "J" caught the slim kid across the mouth, came back again with a swift, raking, backhand swing that slapped the steel rod alongside the slim boy's underslung jaw. Then the cook moved in while the tow-headed cowboy went over backward on his squatted hunkers. Sandy kicked the pale-eyed young renegade in the belly and then in the face. And blood spurted out of his mouth as he doubled over on his side, covering his head and face with his arms.

"Don't, Sandy!" His voice was a whine. "I was only joshin'."

The flat-lipped grin spread Sandy's mouth as he handed the pothook to Platte Belton.

"Comes in handy sometimes for more than just liftin' the lids off your dutch ovens." Then he kicked the towhead in the seat of his pants.

"Somebody shore lied, Coyote," he said quietly, "when they told you you was tough. If we wasn't workin' short-handed, I'd knock you over the head. Damned if I wouldn't."

"He's got enough, Sandy," said the big red-whiskered man. "Fork your pony, Coyote. Ride on out to the cavvy." He turned to the heavy-set, black-haired man with the pot gut.

"You finished supper, Mex? Then go along with the Coyote. You might as well start driftin' 'em. Me'n the boys will ketch you directly."

Coyote wiped blood and slobber from his smashed mouth with the back of a dirty hand. His pale eyes kept sliding to the rugged Sandy who had poured himself a cup of coffee and was standing there, sipping it.

"Somebody told the Coyote," Sandy spoke to nobody in particular, "that he was a dead ringer for Billy the Kid. He's busted a gut livin' up to it."

Mex stood up on wide-spread legs, hitching at his cartridge belt. "The Coyote's had enough, Sandy," he said. "Why don't you let 'im go?"

"You buyin' a stack of dirty whites in this game, Mex?" Sandy's hand was on his gun. His blue eyes puckered, cold as ice.

"Tuck in your shirttails!" Big Sorrel rasped. "When we git our chores done, hire a bullring and paw dirt and beller. Git on out there, Mex, and take the Coyote along. You, Sandy, git a tail holt on yourself."

His green eyes watched Platte Belton. Platte had turned his horse loose and was dippering water from the spring. He was thirstier than he had ever been and was sipping the water slowly so it wouldn't churn inside his empty belly and founder him. He let on like he wasn't paying too much attention to the jangling. Platte Belton was a stranger in a renegade land and he knew his place. And was doing his unobtrusive best to stay there.

Mex and Coyote got on their horses and rode away from camp.

Sandy grinned faintly and shook his head. "I don't put no trust in that Coyote, Sorrel."

"And I don't put no kind of trust in no man!" rasped Sorrel, who seemed to be ramrodding the outfit. "You kin roll that in your tobacco and smoke it, Sandy."

He walked over to where Belton was filling his tin plate and cup. His eyes were hard and green as glass.

"I got no use for strangers. Name me a reason why you'll come in handy. Otherwise . . ." He shrugged his big shoulders.

"I didn't come here to this outfit," Platte Belton said, "a-purpose. I let my horse fetch me. I reckon he smelled water. Or camp. Now I'm here I'll make you a hand. Cookin' . . . whatever you got. . . ."

"Supposin'," Big Sorrel's green eyes studied him narrowly, "it's agin' the law?"

"A man in my fix," Platte Belton said,

"can't very well afford to pick an' choose his chores."

"Right you are, stranger."

CHAPTER TWO

Bounty-Hunting Killer

SANDY walked over to where his saddle horse stood, bridle reins dropped. He picked up the reins and jerked his front cinch tight and slid a short-barreled carbine into the saddle scabbard. Then he stepped aboard. He had an easy way of moving without lost motion. With his compact, well-knit build, and the way he handled himself, Sandy would be tough to whip. Behind that easy, slow grin was a cold-blooded hardness. But, on the other hand, he looked like a man who would go all the way for a pardner.

"Rasslin' them dutch ovens," said Sandy flatly, and a little impatiently, "busts nobody's law. You kin go into his pedigree tomorrow, Sorrel. Yonder rises the Border-jumpers' moon. It's time we moved."

Sorrel gave Sandy a vicious look. "I'm jiggerin' this pasear, Sandy. When I need advice I'll buy me a book on it."

Sandy tugged at a witch's knot in his horse's black mane and began to sing softly, tilting his grin at the rising moon.

"Grind your meal
An' sift your bran.
You'll never make a livin'
In a sandy land!"

The other two cowpunchers mounted. One had a grizzled look. The other was a half-breed Mexican. They passed a bottle of tequila or mescal back and forth.

"Sandy Land," the grizzled renegade said. "That all the tune you know, Sandy?"

"A man don't need to know a million tunes," Sandy grinned.

"That hungry song gits on a man's nerves."

"Then plug your ears. Or go back to your stable chores at the Pitchfork. It's that rot-gut booze that's twisted knots in your nerves, old-timer. Hell, you got nothin' to worry about. You and the 'breed are handlin' the decoys."

"Yeah, I know! Them damn decoys! How do I know I can't draw five-ten years in the Yuma pen fer chousin' them two-bit broomtails aroun' through the Diablitos? Sheriff Barney Ault don't like me nohow. Never did."

"That's your bellyache, Pappy. You hired out for a tough hand. Play your string out. Don't go wettin' no cryin' towel. Tell it to Sorrel. He's ramroddin' this shindavvy."

The half-breed Mexican took a drag at the bottle, corked it and shoved it into the deep pocket of his scarred leather chaps. His mouth was slack and there was a glassy look in his black eyes. He slapped the stock of his saddle gun and grinned.

"*Anda! Anda! Anda!* Le's go!" His voice was thick.

Sandy's grin twisted lopsided. "I wish I was brave like that."

Sorrel mounted his horse. He rode a big hammer-headed bay gelding that looked like he could carry even a big man like Sorrel to hell and back without turning a hair. They were all well mounted. Even the grizzled old Pappy who had no stomach for his work, and the half-breed who was smoking marijuana weed mixed with his black cigarette tobacco.

"All you got to do," Sorrel told Platte Belton, "is to hold down them dutch ovens. Have a pot of coffee. Look for us when we show up."

He reined his horse and rode off with Sandy, the grizzled Pappy and the drunken half-breed Mexican trailing behind them. A hundred yards and they were out of sight in the brushy hills. A little while and the last sounds of their going dimmed into silence.

PLATTE BELTON was alone at the camp in the Diablitos. Alone and afoot. His horse was gone; drifted or hazed off into the night. And there is nothing more disheartening to a cowpuncher than to find himself afoot. He had an all-gone feeling inside. Helpless. Harmless. Set a cowboy afoot in a strange land and you've hamstrung him.

They had done it a-purpose. Hell, yes! Nothing accidental about it. The grinning, hard-eyed, quick-moving Sandy. Big, raw-boned, green-eyed, red-whiskered Sorrel. Pappy and the half-breed Mexican rode away from camp and left him behind to clean up their dirty dishes. They left him afoot so that he could not follow them. So that he could not ride back the way he had come. Back to the big Pitchfork ranch. Or to town.

Platte Belton wanted no part of their night-riding renegade game, whatever it might be. Cattle rustling or horse stealing, gun-running or smuggling. He could be thankful that Sorrel did not value him enough to take him along. And even if he had a fresh horse he doubted if he'd try to ride back out of the Diablitos. Not tonight. There was something going on in the strip of broken, brushy hills that straddled the Border. And unless you knew what it was about, you'd better be content to roundside at camp because those renegades would shoot a lone stranger loose from his saddle without bothering to ask questions.

Just the same, Platte Belton didn't relish it. But a man had to eat and now he was left alone he could take on a bait of grub without

it knotting inside his belly. He ate slowly and washed down the jerky and frijoles and dutch oven bread with strong black coffee. Then he squatted on his hunkers and rolled and lit a cigarette with the glowing end of a mesquite twig he shoved into the bed of coals.

The night's silence fell across the broken brushy hills and the round white moon rode the sky. Millions of stars were out, and the night air was soft and dry and cooling. And tobacco smoke had a good taste in a man's mouth.

Platte Belton allowed himself to relax and enjoy something of the night's peaceful silence. He was getting drowsy and his taut nerves were slacking up when he was startled back to reality. Then he was on his feet and crouched back in the shadows of the brush, his six-shooter gripped in his hand.

Distance somewhat blurred the sounds. They were sounds that are made when men haze a bunch of horses through the night. Hoofs pounding and the rattle of loose rock as they come down a steep slant in the dark and hazed to a run. Then the crack of gunfire.

"Anda! Anda!" The shrill drunken shout of the half-breed Mexican cut like a sharp knife through the other sounds. *"Vamos! Vamos!* Le's go!" And the rattle of gunfire.

Platte Belton caught a brief glimpse of a big bunch of horses topping the skyline. Then a rider or two. Stabs of gun flame. Then the stampeding horses came down the brushy slant, down the dry wash like hell torn loose from its hinges.

"Anda! Anda! Vamos! Le's go-o-o!" Then the drunken shout shrilled to a piercing scream of agony and the sharp crack of a saddle carbine mingled with the half-breed's screams and the broken brushy hills of the Diablitos flung the echoes back and forth.

Belton saw and heard the stampede of wild horses coming down the dry wash and he jumped in behind a big hackberry tree and flattened himself against its big thick trunk.

It seemed as though all the wild mustang horses on earth were charging down through the camp. Wild horses, mules and burros spooked and stampeded in the night. They broke brush and churned the yellow sand into a dust cloud and then the stampede passed on, and the Mexican was no longer screaming, and his horse, with its empty Mexican saddle, bridle reins trailing, whistling and blowing, sweat dripping, traveling crabwise with its neck and head sideways to keep from stepping on the trailing bridle reins, hung up there with the trailing reins fouled in the brush.

Back up the wash a man's heavy voice lifted in a shout.

"The rest of you horse stealin' sons! Throw away your guns and ride out in the open a-clawin' for the high moon. Pronto, hombres! Or you wanta be smoked out?"

"Hold your gunfire, Barney Ault! This ol' wore-out hide of mine ain't worth the waste of a .30-30 bullet!"

"Sounds like Pappy! He ain't worth killin', Barney! What the hell you doin' messed up in this, Pappy?"

"I was horse-huntin' Pitchfork stray ponies. Met up with a drunk half-breed Mexican that had a bottle of panther spit. . . . Keep that badge-polisher from gut-shootin' me fer the glory of it. He got the Mexican. . . ."

"And I'll stop your chin music with a .45 slug if you don't sing a purtier tune, you damned old *deceeho* cut-back. How many in your outfit?"

"There's a feller at camp, Barney." Pappy's voice creaked like a rusty hinge. "He showed up a-ridin' a dun horse with the Pitchfork iron blotched."

Half-a-dozen heavily armed riders came into sight. The weazened looking hatchet-faced man riding in the lead had a law badge pinned to his flannel shirt. A gun was in his hand and his beady red-black eyes were wicked.

"I'm Sheriff Barney Ault from Black River. Throw away your gun and come out from behind that saplin' with your hands high!"

CHAPTER THREE

Old Time Fighting Man

SHERIFF BARNEY AULT from Black River was tough as a boot. A badge polisher and glory killer. A bounty hunter who kept a stack of reward dodgers on file and knew the law value of every outlaw who rode with a price on his head. Ault bragged acidly that he'd rather fetch 'em in dead than to put the Territory of Arizona to the trouble and expense of a jury trial. A thrifty, frugal man, Ault banked his reward money and kept a proud tally of the men he'd killed and the few he'd captured alive and how much their hides had fetched in bounty money.

Platte Belton, steel handcuffs around both wrists, sat on the ground with his back against the big old hackberry tree. The gimlet eyes of Ault bore holes in him. And in a voice that sounded like raw vinegar tastes, the weazened, bowlegged law officer cursed his handcuffed prisoner.

"If you ain't a damn' outlaw," he spat, "what the hell you a-doin' down here in the Diablitos?"

"I was headed for Mexico." Platte Belton swallowed down the anger that threatened to choke him. "I got lost. That old feller Pappy kin tell you I'm a rank stranger here."

"Pitchfork Pappy," said Sheriff Barney Ault, "is the worst damned liar in Arizona

Territory. Where in the hell you from?"

"Montana."

"Why was you run outa Montana?"

"Mebbyso I left there of my own accord."

"What's your name?"

"Platte Belton."

"That's a hell of a name. What name you travelin' under now?"

"Platte Belton."

"It's still a hell of a name."

They brought the bullet-riddled body of the half-breed to camp. One posseman had built up the fire and the dead 'breed looked harmless with the dried blood crusted on his faded old cotton shirt and pants and his dark skin. Just a dead half-breed. He would never again shout his drunken *"Anda!* Le's go!" He had never been actually harmful. Just drunk on cheap tequila and marijuana smoke.

Grizzled old Pappy had been put to work cooking a late supper for the sheriff from Black River and his saloon and poolroom posse. His puckered faded blue eyes watched the law officer with an old cowhand's contempt.

"I wish to hell," Pappy's voice creaked dismally, "I had a good bait of sour pinto beans to feed you fellers. I'd give a purty to watch Barney Ault pukin' an' sweatin' with his guts poisoned. You'd orter pin a leather medal on your chest, Ault, fer murderin' that harmless greaser. . . ."

Pappy squatted on rusty, run-over boot-heels beside the dead Mexican. He pulled the pint bottle from the dead man's chaps pocket and held it up against the firelight. There was a big drink left in the bottle. He pulled the cork with his teeth and spat it on the ground. Then he tilted the bottle, drained it and shuddered as he threw the empty bottle into the brush. Then he hobbled stiffly back to his cooking.

Sheriff Barney Ault was questioning Belton. His hatchet face shoved close to Belton's.

"Who all is in this outfit? Who's ramroddin' it? How many and what's their names and descriptions?"

Platte Belton recoiled. "You'd aughta eat wild onions to take the stink off your breath, Sheriff. It's enough to make a man gag."

"Who's in this outfit?" Ault slapped his handcuffed prisoner alongside the jaw. Hard. One side, then the other. Swift, open-handed slaps. "Start talkin'."

Platte's head ached from the slapping. His puckered gray-blue eyes cut a look at the grizzled Pappy. Pappy was lifting dutch oven lids with the pothook, his head cocked a little sideways, listening. Faded blue eyes were watching from under the brim of his battered old hat. Pitchfork Pappy wasn't missing any bets.

"Who's in this outfit?" Sheriff Barney Ault's voice cracked out like a whiplash.

"Pappy, yonder," said Platte Belton, "and that dead half-breed. And you've got me."

"Who else? Who's ramroddin' this spread?"

"Ask Pappy, or that dead 'breed greaser you shot in the back."

Platte Belton saw the ghost of a grin pass across the leathery, whiskered face of old Pitchfork Pappy. Then Barney Ault slapped him again, rocking the handcuffed prisoner's head sideways with the open-handed cuffing.

PLATTE BELTON'S brain reeled. He spat blood from his bruised mouth. His blue-gray eyes were bleak when they focused again. He could well understand now why some cowpunchers turned outlaw. Why they hated men who wore a nickle-plated law badge.

"I'd shore like to be brave," Platte Belton said, "like you are, Sheriff."

Ault stood there on bowed legs. Hatchet faced, his gray skin stained a dark red across the cheekbones.

"I got ways of draggin' it outa you." He stared into the Montana cowboy's eyes as if trying to read his thoughts. "How many in the outfit? What's their names and what do they look like?"

Platte shook his head. There was a throbbing hum inside his skull and he licked the blood from his smashed lips.

"Mebbyso," he said slowly, "you could work me over till I couldn't take no more punishment and I'd talk. But I'd have to hurt awful bad before I commenced givin' up head. Then like as not I'd lie. . . ."

Sheriff Barney Ault changed his tune. A crafty grin twisted his thin-lipped mouth and his beady eyes glittered cunningly.

"I'll lay cash on the barrelhead," his voice was no more than a thin whisper in Platte Belton's ear, "and take off the handcuffs. Who's in this renegade outfit? Name your price."

"That breath of yourn," said Platte, "still stinks like a gut wagon."

He expected to get slapped again and got ready to duck. But the hatchet-faced law officer just stared into his eyes, studying him.

From a distance came the faint rattle of gunfire. Sheriff Barney Ault stood there, listening intently.

The grizzled Pappy was also listening, a faint grin on his seamed, leathery face. The sheriff from Black River eyed his poolroom cowboy posse with cold-eyed contempt as they bunched there, hands gripping their guns. White-whiskered Pappy chuckled.

"A drunk Mexican," he cackled, "could take a corncob and a lightnin' bug an' spook the pack of you hot town sports plumb outa the country."

Pappy filled a cup of the strong black coffee

and fetched it over to where Platte sat on the ground with his back against the hackberry tree. He shoved the cup of coffee into the prisoner's manacled hands.

Barney Ault decided to leave his prisoner alone for a while, anyhow. He poured himself a cup of coffee and stood there on his wiry, bowed legs, staring southward into the night in the direction from where the scattered sounds of shooting came. He told one of his deputized men to throw a lot of dry brush on the fire and then stood back as the dry wood caught and blazed high in the night.

Pappy cussed. He asked how the hell could a man cook anything on a damned bonfire that reached the sky—like a danged signal fire. But there was no real anger in his cussing and his squinted, faded blue eyes kept covertly watching Sheriff Barney Ault.

Platte Belton sipped his coffee. His legs were free and he pulled them up under him so that he squatted on his heels and could get onto his feet in time to at least dodge the slaps if the caustic-tempered law officer decided to work him over.

But Sheriff Ault kept a man feeding the big bonfire and seemed to be timing it because he looked at the silver watch he carried in the watch pocket of his levis and fastened to a suspender button by a short buckskin string. His town possemen relaxed when the shooting to the south died out. And after half an hour or so Ault looked at his open-faced big silver watch again and told them to let the bonfire down to a bed of coals so Pappy could throw some grub together.

Pappy said they'd better drag the dead half-breed out of the way, first. He couldn't be stumbling over that dead carcass every time he rounded the supper fire to lift the lid on a dutch oven. So they dragged the dead man off a ways and Pappy covered the corpse with one of the old pack tarps.

The sheriff had detailed one of his men to ride herd on the handcuffed prisoner. He'd ordered the man to shoot Platte if he tried to rabbit. Otherwise the law officer paid him no further attention.

PAPPY was doing his best to get himself fired from the cook's job. While Barney Ault watched, the grizzled old rascal went through the pockets of the dead man and when he got blood on his hands he wiped it off carelessly on the dead half-breed's dirty shirt. When Ault snapped at him for to wash his hands before he handled any more grub, Pappy made a half-hearted job of it, and he washed in cold water and without the aid of soap, and dried his hands on the tail of his old faded blue flannel shirt.

He was either a little drunk or just clumsy about spilling ashes in the dutch ovens whenever he lifted one of the lids that was banked with graying hot coals. Finally Ault told one of his men to take over the cooking and keep that dirty old hellion clear away from the grub.

Pappy came over and sat cross-legged on the ground near Platte. A faint grin was on his leathery face, something like a twinkle in his faded blue eyes. There was more than one way, he chuckled drily, to skin a sheriff. And he cut an appraising look at Platte.

"You're a-doin' fair to middlin', son," he said softly, "fer a green hand."

Then his eyes narrowed as he stared at the tarp-shrouded dead half-breed.

"He was nothin' but a half drunk, marijuana smokin' renegade Border jumper 'breed," said the grizzled Pappy. "Harmless. Sorry as hell fer a hand no matter what you put him at. But he was a human bein'. Barney Ault had no call to shoot the pore son in the back thataway. . . ." There was a bleakness to the faded blue eyes.

"Me'n the 'breed was ridin' herd on the decoys," Pappy's voice was barely audible. "We had a hell-slue of them broomtails rounded up and held in a trap pasture back yonder. Wild mares and burros and ol' renegade geldins and a mustang stud or two. You know. Wild horses like you'll find roamin' any rough country. Strays from the remudas, spilled of a dark night on the round-up and never gathered. Wilder'n deer. Stompeded at the drop of a hat.

"Me'n the 'breed had our orders. When the sign was right we throwed open the trap gate an' stompeded our wild bunch. Like to run down Barney Ault's poolroom posse where he had 'em bushed up. Scared the guts outa them barflies. Spooked 'em bad. They commenced bombardin' and we run them wild mustangs straight at 'em in the moonlight. It busted up Barney Ault's ambush. And it decoyed Ault's posse boys away from what was actually goin' on a few miles south of here.

"And from the sound of that shootin' you just heard a while ago them spooked ponies musta busted some more outlaw traps the Border Patrol gents had set. Them sorry specimens of law officers musta sighted Barney Ault's signal fire and they'll be trailin' into camp directly, tuckered out and shore empty handed.

"While, somewheres south of the Mexican line, Mex an' the tow-headed Coyote and Sandy and Big Sorrel has delivered the goods that's strictly C.O.D. And it's another day, another dollar. You commencin' to ketch on, son?"

Platte Belton spilled tobacco into a white rice paper and rolled it into shape and lit it. The white rice cigarette paper marked him as being from the northern cow country.

Here in the southwest they rolled their tobacco in brown wheat straw cigarette papers.

"I'm commencin'," said Platte Belton, "to savvy."

"And how you like it as far south as you come, young feller?"

Platte Belton lifted his hands. The nickle-plated steel handcuffs glinted, their three-link connecting chain rattling a metallic mockery. Platte's bruised mouth twisted mirthlessly.

"But you wouldn't dicker with Barney Ault to git shut of 'em."

"No."

"You owe not a damned thing to this renegade outfit. Sorrel even set you afoot. Left you fer bait to be picked up by the Law. A lot of men in your fix woulda told Ault the right answers. What made you sull on Ault thataway?"

"The devil in hell hates a squealer, Pappy. Mebbyso Ault used the wrong approach. But most mebby he'd a double-crossed me in the long run."

The deputized guard had gone to get a cup of coffee. He came back, scowling, a filled tin cup in one hand, his other hand on his gun.

"What are you two cookin' up, Pappy?" His voice sounded ugly. "Don't try any smart tricks. I got shootin' orders."

"I doubt," creaked the grizzled Pappy, "you got the guts to carry 'em out."

"Try a getaway," snarled the guard, "and find out. You damned ol' broke down bum. How come you quit your pension job shovelin' horse manure at the Pitchfork barn to throw in with the Diablito renegades. Barn man at the Pitchfork ranch gives you booze money to blow in town. What more kin a broke down old has-bin like you want?"

The shadows almost hid the bleak look in old Pappy's faded blue eyes. But Platte saw. And wondered. This old rannyhan was dangerous. But that poolroom cowboy hadn't the sense to realize it.

Dangerous. And crafty. Those carelessly put questions. Feeling out Platte Belton. Pappy was not drunk. Neither was he anybody's damnfool. And he had sense enough to hold his temper. The bleak look left his eyes. His leathery grin showed.

"I'm payin' off an election bet. I bet that Barney Ault wouldn't git elected. And lost. To pay the bet I got to git arrested an' jailed by Sheriff Barney Ault."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sign of the Double Cross

IT WAS getting daylight when some men on horseback showed up. Their horses were sweat-marked and leg-weary. The men were heavily armed. Two belonged to the short-handed, overworked Border Patrol. The older Border Patrol man looked weary and a little disgusted. The younger rider was still going on excitement.

"They slipped through," the older one said to Sheriff Ault. "Those Pitchfork cowhands you had staked out got trigger-jumpy when a bunch of loose broomtails spooked 'em. They cut loose with all the guns they could grab. And under the cover of all that Fourth of July racket Big Sorrel slid his pack train through and across. Gun-running is a good payin' business here in the Diablitos. You can deal me out on your next jackpot, Ault. A man my age needs his night's rest. What did you grab in your dragnet besides the experience?"

Sheriff Barney Ault motioned curtly at the handcuffed Platte Belton and the grizzled Pappy who sat cooling coffee beside the man from Montana.

Both the Border Patrol men stared hard at Platte. The older one grinned faintly at Pappy.

"What you doin' down here, you ol' wore out *desecho?*" His tone was friendly.

"Losin' sleep, the same as you. Sheriff Barney Ault captured me. This coffee's got whiskers on it. Do you good. You want to see how Barney Ault builds his tough rep, lift the tarp on that half-breed's carcass."

Four or five more armed men rode up. There horses were in Pitchfork brand. The man riding in the lead was about Platte's age. Somewhere around thirty.

He rode a long stirrup and sat his saddle with his weight a little to one side. Tall, well-built, with hair and a carefully-trimmed mustache the color of new rope. Hawk-nosed and lean-jawed. His eyes were a pale gray green under bleached brows.

"A snipe hunt!" His voice was flat-toned. He grinned faintly. He spoke to Sheriff Ault. "Somebody hazed a bunch of wild horses down on top of us and the boys got excited and opened up like the battle of Gettysburg. Big Sorrel's gun-runners slipped through. Who you got here, Barney?"

He rode over to stare down from his saddle at the handcuffed Platte.

"The big handsome feller on the Pitchfork geldin'," creaked Pappy, "is none other than Chan Cleeter, the main ramrod of the big Pitchfork outfit. His Californy pants has buckskin sewed in the seat. He gits his purty shirts made to order. And his initials sewed into the tops of his alligator boots. He wouldn't be found dead in less than a fifty dollar Stetson. And he's as handy cuttin' a pigeon wing at a Black River dance as he is with that rawhide reata.

"He's plumb ignorin' ol' Pappy till him and

Barney Ault decides if they'll knock me in the head or send me back to my barn chores at the Pitchfork home ranch. Keerful how you talk to Chan Cleeter, son. Cleeter an' Ault pick their teeth with the same quill. . . ."

Chan Cleeter's gray-green eyes studied the handcuffed prisoner. Sheriff Barney Ault walked over on his banty legs.

"Says his name's Platte Belton," said Barney Ault. "And he comes from Montana."

"And what else," Chan Cleeter's flat-toned voice had a cutting edge, "does he have to say?"

"Not—one—damned—thing." Sheriff Barney Ault measured the word's one by one.

They looked Platte over coldly. Following old Pappy's eyed warning, Platte squatted on his heels with his back against the trunk of the old hackberry tree. His blue-gray eyes met the gray-green scrutiny of the Pitchfork ramrod without flinching. Barney Ault stood on banty bowed legs, ferret eyed, a thin smile on his hatchet face.

Then Chan Cleeter reined his horse and rode over to the rope corral. Two men had rounded up a remuda of saddle horses and were coraling them. Chan Cleeter and his Pitchfork men unsaddled and changed horses.

The two Border Patrol men tossed their empty coffee cups into the dispan. The older one motioned the younger and they mounted their sweat-marked horses and rode away without waiting for breakfast or changing horses. They were going back to their camp on the Mexican Border. And the older Border Patrol man was silent, disgruntled, and took no pains to hide his feelings. His younger pardner left the camp a little reluctantly.

WHEN they had ridden out of sight and beyond earshot, Sheriff Barney Ault cursed the older Border Patrol officer in a reedy monotone. Cursed the man for no apparent reason except that he disliked him.

"The gover'ment-paid snake!" Barney Ault's tone was acid. "Blames me because he can't spring the trap quick. Them gover'ment sons ride in pairs, spend half their time fillin' out them regulation gover'ment reports. Bookkeepers! Pen-pushers! Lose an hour's sleep and they bellyache. . . . Damn Jake Craven and his Border Patrol. . . ."

Chan Cleeter grinned over his coffee. His teeth were big and white. The grin stayed there, never reaching his cold, gray-green eyes.

"Send your posse back to town, Barney. We'll ride on to the ranch. What about this dead carcass?"

Barney Ault had a weasel's grin. "Pappy thinks so damn' much of the greaser, I'll just make Pappy a present of it."

"This Platte Belton from Montana?"

Sheriff Barney Ault walked over to where Platte squatted on his hunkers. He took a small key attached to a buckskin string from his pocket. He told Platte to shove out his hands. Then he unlocked the shiny steel handcuffs and shoved them into a pouch on his belt that fastened with a glove snap.

"When you build yourself a tough rep, Belton," said Sheriff Barney Ault, "I might trouble myself to ride down into the Diablitos and collect the bounty on your hide." He turned and walked away on his bowed legs.

"Fer all the world," chuckled Pappy, "like a fisherman takin' a little 'un off the hook and throwin' it back into the crick to grow size."

Then the grizzled old Pappy lifted his voice. "How's about me, Sheriff?"

"The hell with you." Barney Ault never even looked around.

Pappy grinned his leathery grin at Chan Cleeter. "I'm kinda reppin' fer the Pitchfork down here in the Diablitos, Cleeter. I ain't a-goin' back to them barn chores fer a while."

"The hell you say, Pappy." Chan Cleeter matched the old rascal's grin. "Don't bother to leave here. Your job at the Pitchfork is gone with the wind. You was fired the day you rode away from the barn to go on that last jag. Your name is scratched off the Pitchfork books. I'll look around for your

grave the next time I'm down in the Diablitos."

Once they took a notion to go, they left camp abruptly. Sheriff Barney Ault sent his posse on to town. He rode along with the big blond Pitchfork ramrod, the Pitchfork cowpunchers trailing them.

When they were gone Pappy picked up a short-handled shovel and looked around for a place to dig a grave for the dead half-breed.

"Somewheres," he said, "where this danged caleche ain't rock hard."

Platte Belton reached for the short-handled shovel. "If you'll look around in the brush for my six-shooter, Pappy, I'll tend the grave chores."

Pappy's faded blue eyes looked straight at him. And his creaky voice broke a short silence.

"There's a hell of lot of questions millin' around inside your skull, son. And we'll git to 'em directly. I got one or two of my own. If you kin give me honest, straightforward answers, then I'll set you straight on what's a-goin' on down here in the Diablitos. And I shore as hell hope we kin git together on a deal.

"Because that Chan Cleeter Pitchfork ramrod wasn't lyin' one damned bit when he said he'd be lookin' around for my grave the next time he rode down this-away. I shoulda stopped the mate to the .30-30 slug that killed this sorry half-breed Mexican. I'm puzzled to know why Ault turned chicken-hearted when he had his gun sights lined on my brisket, then lowered his gun an' let the hammer down easy on my ca'tridge."

Platte Belton from Montana did not know what prompted the gesture. But he let go the shovel-handle and shoved his right hand at the grizzled old cowpuncher.

The bleak look in old Pappy's eyes softened, leaving them faded blue and a little misted. The grip of his horny calloused hand was strong.

"Never mind them questions I aimed to ask you, son. I ain't pokin' along your back-trail. And I'm shore obliged for what your handshake means. But I can't let you go into this blindfolded. Me, I'm old and if I die tonight I'm still ahead of the game. But you're too young to die down here in the Diablitos, son. I'll pilot you out after dark. And you keep a-goin' yonderly from there."

PLATTE BELTON shook his head. The steel handcuffs had left raw red welts. He rubbed his bruised wrists. His mouth was bruised from the sheriff's slapping.

"I ain't used to that kind of handlin'," he said. "I got a notion to build me a tough rep down here in Diablitos. Make it worth Sheriff Barney Ault's while to come after me."

"You can't win." Pappy bit off the words.

"And I can't run away," Platte Belton said. "I kin learn a few things by keepin' my eyes and ear propped open. Or you kin tell me what goes on down here. I've bin smellin' somethin' rotten. It stunk so strong it drove them Border Patrol men away before they had time to drink a cup of coffee. The gray-headed 'un looked sick to his stomach. And plenty on the prod."

"Jake Craven," Pappy said, "got a lot of them gray hairs tryin' to stop the smuggler, gun-runnin', cattle-rustlin', horse stealin' gaps in his Diablito strip of Mexican Border. He's had that rotten stink in his nostrils a long time. He musta knowed last night would be just one more batch of law batter spoiled.

"Mebbyso he just taken that young green Border Patrol feller along to show the new man what he was up against, here in the Diablitos. Anybody but Jake Craven woulda put in for a transfer. But he'. mule-headed. And prideful. And he don't scare easy. So he keeps a-tryin' to plug the holes in the Border he's under-paid to patrol short-handed. Jake Craven is one hell of a good man. Brave. And on the level. They tried to buy him off but he won't sell out. They've done their damndest to scare him off but he won't spook. Jake Craven aims to hang an' rattle till he gits the job done. Or till they dry-gulch him some night."

"Sheriff Barney Ault cussed him out after he'd gone," Belton prodded.

"Ault hates Jake Craven's guts. Because he's scared of Jake. I don't mean he's scared to shoot it out with him, because Barney Ault, for all his bushwhackin' cold-blooded bounty hunter murderin', ain't scared to stand flat-footed and shoot it out with any man on earth. It ain't that kind of fear Ault has for Jake Craven. It's because that Border Patrol man has got his bulldog teeth into somethin' and won't turn his bite loose and if he hangs on long enough he'll drag Sheriff Barney Ault down."

"Ault," Platte Belton voiced a shrewd guess, "hides behind a law badge to kill men he don't like. That's actually legalized murder."

Pappy nodded and waited for him to go on. And Platte Belton watched the grizzled old cowpuncher narrowly when he tried another shot in the dark.

"Sheriff Barney Ault could do even better than that," Platte Belton went on. "He could use his law badge to make himself a lot of money. For all his bounty huntin', he could be in cahoots with Big Sorrel."

"Hard to prove, son. And you'd never live to git outa the Diablitos alive with that proof. How come you got the notion?"

"Sheriff Barney Ault," Platte said, "tried

to pump me. He wanted the names and descriptions of Sorrel and his outfit. Now he's bound to know Sorrel and every man in Sorrel's outfit by name and by sight and by accurate description. So he was just testin' me out to see if I'd squeal to the Law. Ain't that right, Pappy?"

"That's correct. He left you alive a-purpose for Sorrel to look you over and size you up. Sorrel is short-handed fer men that'll actually go the route. Hell, that's why Ault didn't gut-shoot you. He left you behind fer Sorrel to try you out. And he cuffed you around till you got a grudge ag'in' the Law. So you'd be rearin' to throw in with Sorrel's renegade outfit to work out your grudge ag'in' the Law he reps for.

"But why he let *me* stay alive is somethin' else. Unless he figgers that I'll come in handy when the sign is right. I'd be doin' Barney Ault a big favor some day if I killed Chan Cleeter. And I got plenty reason to hate Chan Cleeter that bad. And that spur-jingler Pitchfork ramrod is gittin' too doggoned big fer his fancy britches."

Pappy quit talking long enough to poke around in the brush until he located a jug. He uncorked it and offered Platte a drink and the Montana cowhand took a pull at the jug. It was corn whiskey and potent. It burned all the way down. Pappy gulped it like it was cool water, then corked the jug. His faded blue eyes were bleak with bitter memories.

"I ramrodded the Pitchfork outfit fer a long time," the old man went on. "And the Kansas City packin' outfit that owns it had no kick a-comin'. Chan Cleeter tackled me fer a job and I hired him. He's a crackerjack cowman fer all his dude range clothes. And little by little I let him handle more responsible jobs. I wasn't too old to make a hand but on the other hand I was gittin' kinda stove-up and willin' enough to turn a lot of the hard ridin' over to a younger strawboss.

"It give me more time to spend around the home ranch with the missus and kid. And I'd moved the misses to town of a winter so's the kid could finish her school and till I turned some of the work over to Cleeter I didn't git to see my fam'ly more'n once every two-three months. Chan Cleeter shore taken over and he worked hard at it and I was almighty grateful to him when I got to spend so much time with the missus and kid. Then she was finished school and she passes them civil service examinations and Jake Craven managed it so she got a job as stenographer at his headquarters at Black River. She taken to the job like a young duck to water and in no time she was runnin' the Border Patrol headquarters office and Craven was her 'Uncle Jake' and he was as proud of the kid as if he was her pappy.

"The missus never let on she was ailin' till she had that first stroke. First time she was ever down in her life. And I spent most of that year in town with her because the doc said there'd be a second stroke and it might come any time and when it did, it'd take her. Almost a year later, it struck, and I buried the finest woman on earth.

"My daughter Abbie taken it brave. She's a good girl, Abbie. She wanted to keep house fer me. But I had all of the town I could stand. I was goin' back to the ranch. So Abbie went to live with the Cravens. Jake Craven and his good wife taken Abbie in like she was their own daughter. And I sold the town house and got ready to pull out for the Pitchfork home ranch.

"I got the letter that day. It was from the Kansas City owners. It was a gut shot. I was fired. Paid off. Chan Cleeter had my ramrod job. The letter said that for further information I could consult Sheriff Barney Ault at Black River."

PAPPY took another pull at the jug, then tapped in the cork with the heel of his hand. His grin was leathery.

"Barney Ault had the answer. He told it to me without battin' an eye. He said he had proof I'd bin in cahoots with the cattle rustlers that was holed up in the Diablitos. That I'd bin lettin' them rustlers whittle for years on the Pitchfork livestock. He had the proof. If I wanted it laid on the line, he'd do so. He'd arrest me for cattle rustlin' and he'd produce that proof in law court.

"Ault wasn't runnin' any whizzer. He had the goods to back every word he said. Chan Cleeter had gathered the evidence like a range detective. The Law could send Pappy Crawford to the Territorial prison at Yuma without a bit of trouble. But on account of my daughter Abbie Crawford, the Law was willin' to let it drop. But Pappy Crawford was done as ramrod at the Pitchfork."

Pappy's voice creaked into silence. A dismal silence. Then he broke it.

"Chan Cleeter had bin courtin' my daughter Abbie. I still don't know what headway he was makin' with her. I never asked her about it. Losin' my wife and my job at the same time kinda taken the guts outa me. I reached fer the jug and I've never let go of it. Couldn't let go. My guts was cold and I had to warm 'em with booze. I shoulda killed Chan Cleeter when he offered me the barn job at the Pitchfork headquarters ranch. The lowest down job on a cow outfit. A pension job.

"I shoulda pulled a gun and shot Chan Cleeter down in his boot tracks. But I didn't. I taken the barn man job. And I held it down —with a jug in the manger. Then a few weeks ago I rode away from it. I saddled one of my old string of top horses and rode into

the Diablitos and I throwed in with Big Sorrel, the cattle rustler I was supposed to be in cahoots with.

"Big Sorrel didn't want me down here. He'd a dry-gulched me. Only that Sandy Land feller wouldn't let Sorrel kill me. Sandy is tough as a boot. Big Sorrel's half scared of that Sandy Land renegade. When there's a job on, like there was last night, Sorrel puts me in charge of the decoys. Gives me a sorry man like that pore half-breed feller we just buried.

"My job is to haze a bunch of broomtails down into the law traps they got set to ketch Sorrel and his renegades, to spring the trap. Last night it was wild horses. The time before that it was a decoy pack train of mules that we drifted through the Diablitos by moonlight. When Jake Craven and one of his green hands finally run us down and stop us, they find nothin' like contraband in the kyack boxes them mules is packin'. The decoy pack train is carryin' empty kyacks.

"But the pack train that Sorrel and Sandy and the Coyote and Mex has slid acrost the Border is loaded with rich contraband. What they smuggled acrost, I don't know, because I never ketched sight of their pack train. It was most likely guns an' ca'tridges they was runnin' to the rebels in Sonora. Anyhow, Jake Craven and his Border Patrol boys stop the decoy pack train.

"I felt almighty low down, mister, and I shore hated to look Jake Craven in the eye. Till I heard him chucklin' soft. And I knew he was onto my game. But before he could swap a confidential with me, Sheriff Ault rides up. Ault made the most of it. He wanted to jail me. But Craven said there was no law I'd broke by driftin' a pack train through the Diablitos of a moonlight night and the kyacks tied on the pack saddles plumb empty. And you seen how Jake Craven acted this mornin' when he found me here at Sorrel's camp. He treats me like I'm a broke down old booze-soaked renegade."

Pappy Crawford's grin was mirthless. He uncorked his jug and Platte Belton reached for it. They drank together and the old cowhand corked the jug and shoved it into the brush.

Belton motioned towards the grave where they had buried the dead half-breed.

"I'll take his place. I'll ride the next decoy with you."

"You know what you're up against?"

"I know," Platte Belton said, "just what I'm up against."

"I didn't tell you my troubles, young feller, with the idee of sellin' you a stack of chips in the game. You can't win."

"I can't lose much. But I'm not playin' to lose."

Platte asked why Chan Cleeter was mixed up in it. Ramrodding the Pitchfork was a mighty good job in itself. Top wages. A bonus cut at the end of the year, according to the profits he cleared for the Kansas City owners.

PAPPY CRAWFORD grinned, flat-lipped. "The Diablitos is good cow country. You mighta noticed it's pretty well stocked with Mexican cattle. Sorrel don't git paid off in foldin' money fer the game he's runnin'. He takes his pay-off in cattle. Stolen Mexican cattle. Them cattle is run acrost the Border of a night to save the inspection and duty on 'em. Not far from here is the corrals and dippin' tanks an' brandin' chutes. Them cattle is put into the Double Cross connected brand. The Double Cross is registered under the name of the Diablito Cattle Co.

"Nobody knows fer certain who actually owns the Diablito Cattle Co., but Sorrel ramrods it. And Chan Cleeter's Pitchfork picks up their beef herd at the edge of the Diablitos where they join unto the Pitchfork range. Sheriff Barney Ault inspects and passes the Double Cross cattle that are shipped out by train from Black River to market at Kansas City. And even after the proceeds is split three ways between Sorrel and Barney Ault and Chan Cleeter and all expenses paid, Chan Cleeter's cut of the proceeds amounts to a hell of a lot more than he kin make ramroddin' the Pitchfork. That's why Cleeter, with Ault's help, crooked me outa the Pitchfork ramrod job I'd held for twenty years."

"You could have had your part of the Double Cross iron," said Platte Belton. It was not a question.

"I was married to a lady who liked honesty in a man. I had a kid to raise and I wanted that kid to be proud of her pappy. I'm glad my good wife died, son, before they hamstrung me."

"And your daughter?"

Pappy Crawford's eyes were cold blue as a winter sky. He grined flatly.

"Abbie has a lot of her mother's gentle ways. But there's enough Crawford blood in her to keep her from ever bein' soft. She don't have much to say. But if she figgered it would do any good, Abbie would take a gun and use it where it would do the most good. She'd kill Barney Ault. What she'd do about Chan Cleeter I don't know because it is hard to tell what a girl will do when it is a man like Cleeter.

"There was a while there when I'd a gambled she was goin' to marry Cleeter. And her ma woulda bin happy about it and I'd bin proud to give the bride away. Chan had us fooled that much. Then Abbie kinda cooled off to'rds Chan. I never asked why. And I

wasn't askin' Chan, and he never said. He kinda changed; nothin' you could actually point out or lay a finger on. Cleeter just changed inside and done his best to not show it. And it never cropped out till I got fired from my ramrod job at the Pitchfork.

"He waited till Sheriff Barney Ault had give me the big verdict. Then it was like Cleeter taken off clothes he'd bin wearin' that didn't actually belong to him. He showed himself up as you seen him. Big and tough and playin' the curly wolf. I never asked Abbie what she thinks about Chan Cleeter like he is now.

"After I commenced hittin' the jug, I stayed away from that kid of mine. Ashamed to let her see what had happened to her pappy. And she savvied and never once did she make the mistake of comin' into the saloons to drag me away from the booze. I ain't seen my daughter Abbie in a long time."

Pappy dug the jug out of the brush again and uncorked it. He hesitated a second, then shoved it toward Platte Belton.

Platte did not want a drink of the potent corn liquor. But he wasn't letting this old cowman drink alone. And he pretended he actually wanted the drink he took. Pappy Crawford's faded blue eyes studied him as he tilted the jug. When he handed it over, the grizzled cowman chuckled softly.

"What's your name, again?"

"Platte Belton." He grinned. "Named for Platte River."

"You're a good man, Platte." He chuckled softly. "I looked fer you to gag on that last drink."

He tilted the jug.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Decoy Fixes to Drive

PAPPY CRAWFORD said there was no use busting their eyeballs watching the skyline for Sorrel and his outfit. "They'll show up," said the old cowman, "when they git here."

Pappy fetched in the little remuda of not more than fifty head of horses and pack mules. All in the Double Cross connected brand. This was no more, the old cowman told Platte, than a change of horses for the gun-running pasear, and the bulk of the Double Cross remuda was inside the big horse pasture at the home ranch.

But what horses there were here were as good as ever Platte Belton had seen in his life and he was used to good cow horses where he came from. The little Spanish mules were sleek and hard and Pappy said they were broke to ride and in the rough country were faster than a good cow horse.

Mexicans preferred mules to horses. But on account of their low withers a man had to rig his saddle with britching as well as the regular breast strap rigging the brush popper cowhands used, to keep a saddle on a mule's back. But as long as a man's saddle stayed on one of them mules he shore as hell wasn't afoot.

The dun horse with the blotched brand that Platte Belton had swapped for at the Pitchfork ranch was with the remuda in the rope corral. Pappy told Platte which Double Cross gelding to rope and saddle. And caught himself a fresh horse. When they had saddled and turned the remuda loose Pappy asked him about the dun with the blotched Pitchfork brand.

"Who was it at the Pitchfork headquarters ranch swapped you that blotched dun pony?"

"I never asked her name. I said I was headed for the Diablitos and needed a fresh horse. This dun geldin' was in the barn. She said to throw my saddle on him. She asked me if I was hungry but I'd had breakfast and it was three hours till noon dinner and I wanted to git along so I just changed horses and thanked the lady for a dipper of water and come on. What's the matter, Pappy?"

"There ain't no wimminfolks at the Pitchfork home ranch, is all."

"This was certainly no man."

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"I know. What's she look like?"

"She's got black hair and the bluest eyes I ever looked at. They kinda crinkle shut when she laughs, and her eyelashes are thick as fringe on a surrey top. Eyebrows kinda heavy. When she smiles, you can't help but smile back at her. Her nose is short and she's got a good chin. It was the first time I ever saw a girl wear cowpuncher levis and I taken her for a boy at first sight, when she stepped outa the barn—with a gun in her hand."

"She had a gun?"

"A .38 Colt pistol. She had it pointed at my belly and it didn't wobble an inch. She wasn't smilin' either. She asked me if I was Sandy Land and I said not that I knowed of. That my name was Platte Belton and I come from Montana. A stranger in a strange land and just about afoot. And I was driftin' toward Mexico by way of the Diablitos and needed a fresh horse. I'd got a closer look and seen it was a girl. I had both hands up but risked a bullet in the belly and tipped my hat like a gentleman. And asked her could she bake a cherry pie. That's when she laughed and her eyes crinkled shut."

Pappy's leathry grin seemed forced. "That was my kid daughter Abbie. She's not a kid any more. Abbie must be twenty by now. Now what in the name of hell was she a-doin' there at the Pitchfork?"

Platte was grinning widely now. "I never asked her. She was saddled up and ready to pull out. I helped her tie a warsack on the back of her saddle. It was heavy and not too bulky. Books, by the feel of the hard corners. And what sounded like loose papers, rustlin' inside the canvas sack. She looked me over mighty close till I commenced to get red-eared and then she smiled and I reckon I grinned plenty silly.

"Then she said yes, she could bake a cherry pie. You know the song."

Pappy nodded.

Platte chuckled softly. "She said she'd bake me a cherry pie some day—if I'd do her a favor. By then she knowed I'd kill a man or burn a church for her smile and I told her so. She said nothin' as bad as that, but she'd left a man locked up in the meat house and would I give her a mile head start and then let him out before he froze to death.

"I told her I'd guarantee the man wouldn't even try to overhaul her. And she forked her horse. She said if ever I get to Black River she'd bake me that cherry pie. Then she rode off.

"The ranch was kinda deserted. Nobody around. When she was long gone I opened the door of the meat house. It's ice-packed and cold in there. It was the dude bookkeeper she had locked up and he was shiverin' in his henskin duds and scared so bad his teeth chattered. He said a masked man had held a gun on him and made him open the big safe in the office, then marched him into the meat house and locked him in. He wasn't trailin' nobody. I left him shiverin' from cold and fear and I forked the dun with the blotched Pitchfork brand and headed for the Diablitos. I hope to eat that cherry pie before long."

PAPPY CRAWFORD was shaking his grizzled head. His grin cracked the leathery skin. There were bright lights in his faded blue eyes.

"That's my Abbie." His voice sounded husky.

"She asked me if I was Sandy Land. It didn't make sense, then. Now I know there is a renegade called Sandy Land. And it still puzzles me. What in hell do you make of it, Pappy?"

"Abbie knows Sorrel. He gits drunk and rides to town with the Coyote an' Mex when they know Sheriff Barney Ault ain't at Black River and they shoot up the town and ride out loaded with likker. I never seen Sandy Land in town. Fact is, I never laid eyes on Sandy till I rode down here into the Diablitos to throw in with Big Sorrel. Sandy comes from nowheres and he's kinda recent. Six months, mebby. And from the way I got him sized up he's aimin' to take the Double Cross away from Sorrel. He's just about that tough enough to git that job done, too."

"I'm tryin' to study back on it," Platte said. "Figger out what she'd a done if I'd said I was Sandy Land. If she'd a taken a shot at me or handed me over that warsack full of books and papers she'd taken outa the Pitchfork safe. What do you think?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Like I said, I ain't seen my Abbie in a long time. . . . She runs Jake Craven's Border Patrol office because he don't savvy the paper work that goes with his job."

They mounted their horses and rode away from camp and on up to a high point to watch the dust devil diablitos. Platte Belton was humming softly:

"Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy, Billy Boy?
Can she bake a cherry pie, Charming Billy?

She can bake a cherry pie
Quick as a cat can wink its eye,
But she's a young thing
And cannot leave her mother!"

Pappy Crawford grinned. His faded blue eyes squinted almost shut as he cut a sidelong look at Platte Belton from Montana.

They got off their horses when they had reached the high knoll that was brushy and rock strewn. The filaree was in bloom. It had been a rainy season. What the natives

called a 'filaree spring.' When that local weed grew in abundance it and the Indian wheat made the best grazing feed to be found in Arizona. And while their horses grazed, bridle reins trailing, Pappy Crawford and Platte Belton squatted on their hunkers in the shade of the mesquite and the old cowman pointed a long arm at the dust devils that swirled and twisted upward.

Pappy claimed he could tell when it was horsebackers or a bunch of cattle being moved that kicked up the dust. Or when it was just the suction of the heat pulling the whirlwind, to make a diablito-twister.

"If its got a dusty tail a-draggin' a quarter-half mile behind on the ground, then there's livestock a-movin'—like that 'un yonder." He pointed at a small diablito that left a dust tail dragging.

The diablito rose high in the cloudless afternoon sky. The dust tail moved on up a dry wash. Then it thinned and vanished and Pappy said it was one or two riders and their horses had quit the dry wash and were traveling on hard ground and coming toward camp and he and Platte might as well ride on down again and back to camp.

Platte Belton had his-shooter. Pappy had found it in the brush and given it back to him. But he packed no saddle gun. Pappy was armed with saddle carbine and six-shooter.

"I'm kinda ashamed now," the old cowman said with a faint grin, "of what I used to be almighty prideful about. I never used a gun on a man in my life. Mostly, I never packed a six-shooter. It'd be in my warsack on the round-up. Left home when I rode off from the ranch. I always had the notion a gun got a man into a heap more trouble that it ever got him out of. Now I had to change that notion, I taken to a gun too late to be what you'd call handy with a shootin' iron."

Platte said not to worry too much about it. That he wasn't cut out for a gun-slinger, himself.

"It's a handicap," he told the old cowman. "We'll have to handle the best we know how when the time comes."

"We make a sorry pair matched agin' professional gun-fighters like Big Sorrel an' Sandy Land," Pappy said. "And the young Coyote an' Mex."

Platte Belton said they'd have to whet their brains to get their wits sharp enough to outwolf Sorrel and his outfit. And until the sign was right, they'd check the bets to Big Sorrel and Sandy Land. And take their slim chances on being bushwhacked by the Coyote and Mex.

"Sandy Land," said Pappy, "is fixin' to take the Double Cross away from Sorrel. He's tough. But he won't shoot a man where his galluses cross. It'll pay us to throw in with Sandy in case he calls fer a showdown."

Platte said he already had it figured out that far. The question was if they'd get the chance to declare themselves on Sandy Land's side.

THEY rode down the slant and Pappy pointed towards camp and said mebbyso they'd learn the answer before they grew much older.

"That's the Coyote yonder, just got off his horse. He's prowlin' through the brush a-huntin' fer my jug. Mex can't be far off."

But when they rode up to camp the young tow-headed renegade called the Coyote was nowhere in sight. He and his horse had vanished.

"One shore certain way never to locate a jug," Pappy's voice lifted to a dismal creak, "is to kill the man that cached it. You might as well come out, Coyote. Wherever you're bushed up."

Platte Belton looked down from his saddle and the boot prints that sank deep in the mound of fresh earth that marked the place where they had buried the half-breed.

"Somebody should know," said Platte quietly, "that it's bad luck to walk acrost a new grave. It's a sign he'll die next."

"You comical sons!" That was the Coyote's voice. "You two-bit comical sons! I got a mind to cut me two more notches, Mex."

"You change your mind, Coyote." Mex rode out from behind the brush, his six-shooter in his hand. He rode wide around the new grave. His black eyes glittered redly. The knife-scar was a bone white ridge along his swarthy skin.

"Not even a pot of coffee," his voice was a snarl. "You're a hell of a cook, Montana. You, Pappy, dig up a jug while you're still alive. Me'n the Coyote needs somethin' to work on."

Pappy dismounted stiffly and without stepping out of his tracks he leaned down and lifted the jug from the brush.

Platte Belton heard the *click-click* of a gun-hammer being thumbed back to full cock. The ominous sound came from behind the manzanita thicket nearby.

"Let it down, Coyote." Mex never took his black eyes or his gun from Platte Belton. "We got our orders. You kill ol' Pappy and I'll have to gut shoot this thing from Montana. And then, by the hell, Sorrel will put me'n you on decoy herd. And I don't want no dose of the lead poison Barney Ault gives them pore suckers on decoy herds. Let that gun-hammer down, Coyote. Don't crowd a man's luck thataway." He cut a swift look at the boot marks that crossed the new grave.

"You superstitious Mex son!" The Coyote's laugh had a brittle sound. He came out around the thick manzanita brush with his cocked gun.

Mex showed his white teeth in a flat lipped

snarl. "Don't call me that, Coyote." His gun swung away from Platte's belly.

"Hell, I never meant nothin'!" The Coyote's pale eyes shifted with fear as he cringed under the threat of Mex's gun. "Me'n you is pardners, ain't we, Mex?"

"Shore we're pardners." Mex's white teeth bared. He cursed the Coyote in two languages for all the fighting names he could think up.

The Coyote took the foul cursing with a sickly buck-toothed grin, fear and hatred in his shifty pale eyes. He let down his gun-hammer and shoved his notched handled six-shooter into its holster. He stood there with cold sweat beading his dirty yellow-skinned face and took it.

"Now fetch me that jug," Mex said, when he had run out of cuss words and finished up with a string of foul Mexican oaths. "You ever call me a cuss name again, Coyote, I'll rip your belly wide open to spill your steamin' guts on the ground. Fetch me that likker."

The Coyote obeyed the command, sweating with a coward's sick fear.

MEX drank the warm raw corn whiskey thirstily. Then shoved the jug at Coyote and told him not to get himself drunk.

"We got a long night ahead of us. And on an empty belly." He had put his gun in its holster and now he reached for it as he swung around on Platte Belton. "Not even a pot of coffee!"

"Don't try to cuss me out, Mex," Platte's hand was on his gun, "like you cussed the Coyote. Or I'll prove what I said about the man that walked across that new grave."

Platte's blue gray eyes were narrowed to slits. Pappy had sensed it and his gun was in his hand and pointed at the Coyote.

They would never get a better chance to kill these two treacherous renegades. They had the bulge. They'd be fools not to take advantage of what might be their last chance to kill before they were taken from ambush.

Mex and the Coyote knew they were standing in the black shadow of Death right now. Its chill was there in the hot, dry Arizona sunshine.

Platte's gun was in his hand and the sunlight glinted on its blued steel barrel. Then the moment was past and gone and he could not kill a man in cold blood.

Mex sensed it and the fear went out of his opaque black eyes. Something like contempt twisted his hard, cruel mouth. But he wasn't fool enough to crowd his luck.

"Don't shoot, Montana. Sorrel sent me'n the Coyote to fetch you back with me if you was still here. He didn't figger on Pappy bein' alive so he never gimme orders regardin' him, but Sorrel's puttin' you on decoy herd so I reckon Pappy goes along with you. I won't never cuss you out, Montana, till I've got a gun in my hand to back it."

"I don't wanta die young, Pappy." There was a snarling whine in the Coyote's thin voice. His pale eyes were sliding sideways towards Mex and the warm raw corn liquor had commenced working. He was waiting for a chance to pull his gun, even as he whined for mercy.

"Either kill the whinin', yeller-bellied coyote," said Mex, "or put up your gun, Pappy. Sorrel give us orders to git back acrost the Border without wastin' no time. And you know how damned ornery he gits if a man keeps him a-waitin'. You got my permission to gut-shoot that Coyote whelp if that's what's holdin' you back. Only let's git untracked here before we bog down. That decoy's got to git goin'."

Mex didn't seem to give a damn if Coyote got killed. Or else it was a good bluff he was running. Anyhow, the tough young tow-headed Coyote took it for the Gospel and no amount of booze could warm the chill of fear that crawled inside his belly.

"Don't murder me, Pappy!"

"I'd shore be proud to," Pappy said, "but I somehow can't cut 'er. What's the decoy, Mex?" He lowered his gun but did not put it away.

CHAPTER SIX

Sandy Land

THE decoy consisted of six Mexican mules carrying dummy packs. Empty crates that had once held rifles and carbines that had been run across the Border. Empty cases that had recently been packed with cartridges that had been delivered to the rebels in Mexico. The dummy packs were roped on the packsaddles and the packs covered with canvas tarps. The mules strung out into a pack train, tied head to tail, following a gray mare that Pappy led.

They had corraled the mules and packed them with the empty dummy gun crates and ammunition cases, there at camp. And for the first few miles Mex and the Coyote rode along the trail a little ways in the lead of the moving pack train. While Platte Belton brought up the rear. And when they reached an old adobe corral, not more than a mile north of the Mexican Border, Mex and the Coyote pulled up and Mex gave them the orders Sorrel had told him to pass on to the decoy guard.

Mex handed over an old, open-faced silver watch, a buckskin string attached to its stem ring.

"When the hands on this turnip says midnight," Mex showed his white teeth in an evil grin, "you drift this decoy pack train down the wash into Old Mexico. Act like you're

actually runnin' guns an' ca'tridges acrost the Border. Craven's Border Patrol will stop you at the Line. He's got a hot tip that we didn't git it all acrost last night and Sorrel's got to deliver the balance tonight before them paisanos will turn over that bunch of dogies they're holdin' at the corrals south of the Line. And that hot tip is about half the truth, fer a fact. Only Sorrel is takin' them cattle, regardless. And he'll be shovin' 'em up through the Diablito Pass about the time Craven's Border Patrol is lookin' your soogans over fer lice an' nits. You fellers got it?"

"Where," asked Pappy, "will Barney Ault be, about midnight?"

"Barney Ault will be pickin' up the point of them Mexican dogies that's bein' funneled through the Pass into the Diablitos. Barney Ault an' Chan Cleeter will both be on hand to tally them cattle as Sorrel an' Sandy point 'em through by the light of the silvery moon. Sorrel an' Chan Cleeter has bin short-changin' Barney Ault on the cattle tallies and this time he's goin' to do his own countin' as they funnel through the Pass, instead of takin' Chan Cleeter's an' Sorrel's tally.

"Sorrel tells Chan Cleeter that Barney Ault sent Sandy Land down to throw in' with Sorrel for a rep to look after Ault's int'rests. Cleeter figgers Sorrel is holdin' out on him, Cleeter. Sandy Land sets back an' says nothin' an' damn little of that, and his hand stays near his gun. Sandy acts like he's got an ace in the hole and they don't dare make him turn it face up. They're all jumpy as hell and suspicious of one another an' mistrustful as so many church deacons that's bin dippin' sticky fingers into the collection plate.

"They was none of 'em turnin' his back on the others when me'n the Coyote rode away from where we're camped at the upper end of Diablito Pass. They squatted around on their hunkers makin' war medicine when the Pitchfork bookkeeper rode up with the bad news that somebody had stuck him up at the Pitchfork home ranch an' robbed the safe.

"By hell, that actually set 'em back on their spurs! They looked like they'd bin gut-shot. Barney Ault looked sick enough to puke. Chan Cleeter's jaw slacked and his eyes bugged out. They looked like they wanted to rabbit. But Sorrel won't let 'em. Then Chan Cleeter up and shot the bookkeeper. What you make of it?"

Pappy shook his grizzled head. "Chan Cleeter headed for the Pitchfork ranch when he left camp this mornin'. He taken Barney Ault along."

"That was a bluff," said Mex, "to fool them poolroom posse boys Ault fetched along. And to git them Pitchfork cowhands out from underfoot. Chan Cleeter and Barney Ault aint' lettin' nobody watch 'em take delivery on that trail drive of stolen Mexican dogies tonight.

"Sheriff Barney Ault sent his poolroom boys back to town. Chan Cleeter sent his Pitchfork cowboys on to the home range to tap a likker keg an' poker one another outa their fightin' wages. Then Chan Cleeter an' Barney Ault turned off south into the Diablitos. They was here at camp a-waitin' when Sorrel and us got back from deliverin' them guns we run acrost last night."

"You said," Pappy's voice creaked, "that Sorrel didn't figger on me bein' alive to handle tonight's decoy. But if Cleeter an' Ault showed up at Sorrel's camp, you knowed it was only the half-breed Mexican got killed. What give Sorrel the idee I wouldn't be alive to ride the decoy tonight?"

Mex stiffened a little. Then bared his teeth. "Sorrel heard Chan Cleeter tell me'n the Coyote to kill you when the sign was right."

"Why didn't you let Coyote bushwhack me, then?"

Mex's grin thinned. "The Pitchfork put a thousand dollar bounty on your hide, Pappy. I didn't want it to be the Coyote who collected. I kin use that thousand bucks. That much money would plumb spoil a young whelp like the Coyote. Then Montana here kinda taken the deal away from me. I don't see no chance of collectin' that bounty tonight."

Mex was a little more than half drunk. The corn liquor loosened his tongue. He said they'd better be rattling their hocks or Sorrel would skin him and the Coyote alive. Mex and Coyote rode off through the broken country, lost to sight around the first twist in the trail.

PAPPY CRAWFORD and Platte Belton moved into the black shadow with their guns in their hands. But Mex and the Coyote were not slipping back to collect bounty on the old cowman's hide. And after a while Pappy and Platte Belton commenced to relax a little. It was still two hours until midnight. And nothing to do but wait. Let the pack mules graze.

Wait and worry. Pappy finally put it into words. And it didn't sound so good.

"Barney Ault will figger out it was my Abbie that stole what Chan Cleeter kep' locked in his big safe. He and Cleeter will figger she will turn it over to Jake Craven if I'm killed. They'll have to kill Craven now. Tonight. With me'n Craven both dead, Abbie Crawford will be left unprotected with a war-sack full of dynamite. I hate to ask a favor of any man, but I'm askin' you to pull outa this right now. Hightail it fer Black River. Locate my Abbie. Git her outa the country if

you have to shanghai kidnap the girl. Pull out right now, son. Pronto."

"I had in mind," said Platte Belton, "to marry her. If I could somehow talk her into it, and if it's all right with you."

"I got no kick a-comin' there, Platte. Fer all I know you might be a bad 'un, but if you turn out bad, then I'm a pore judge of a man. Anyhow you cant' fool my Abbie. And it'll be up to her." He held out a gnarled hand. Platte gripped it.

"Now hit the trail, son. Good luck and God bless you both."

Platte shook his head. "The girl that promised to bake me that cherry pie," he said, "would never marry the man that left her pappy in a tight."

Pappy Crawford was all set to argue it out. And Platte got ready to beat down the old cowman's argument, point by point. Then they both tensed, their guns in their hands.

Somebody on horseback was riding up the brushy dry wash. He wasn't being very stealthy about it. On the contrary, he was announcing his approach in no uncertain manner.

"Grind your meal
An' sift your bran.
You'll never make a livin'
In a sandy land!"

Horse and rider shuffled into plain moonlit view, the horse traveling at a running walk through the heavy sand. The man's carbine glinted in the moonlight as he carried it in the crook of his left arm. He rode past the pack mules that had been turned loose and were grazing with the gray mare.

"Sandy!" Pappy's voice creaked. "Sandy Land!"

"Don't shoot a man," Sandy Land rode up to within a short distance of where they crouched in the black shadow of the adobe corral, "till you know if he's friend or enemy. Montana with you?"

"And my gun is pointed at your brisket," Platte Belton said.

"Just as long as you don't pull the trigger. I bushed up back yonder and watched Mex and the Coyote ridin' like they wasn't wastin' no more time. I was scared I'd find you both killed off. Chan Cleeter put a bounty on Pappy's hide. And that pair of dirty deuces would murder their own grandmother for a lot less than the price Cleeter's got hung on you. The Coyote kills for the hell of it. And that whole Double Cross outfit is jumpy and quick-triggered this fine moonlight night."

"Includin' you, Sandy?" Belton's voice was flat-toned.

"That goes double for me, Montana," Sandy Land spilled tobacco in a brown paper and rolled it and licked it. The match flame cupped in his hands showed a faint grin. He blew out the light. Tobacco smoke drifted out with his next words.

"Sighted anything of Jake Craven and his greenhorn Border Patrol pardner?"

"It's nearly two hours yet till midnight," said Pappy, "when we're due to run this decoy pack train into his Law trap."

"I doubt if Jake Craven is goin' to waste time tonight on ary decoys. I look for him to show up here at the 'dobe corral. And we might as well slip the packs off them mules and turn 'em plumb loose. Craven's Border Patrol is done through nibblin' at decoy bait."

Sandy Land seemed almighty sure and certain of himself. But Platte Belton and Pappy stayed back in the black shadow, their guns ready.

"I made the easiest thousand dollars tonight," grinned Sandy Land, "that I ever hope to collect. Foldin' money and it's in my pocket. And the promise of that much more when I git the job done. Chan Cleeter an' Sheriff Barney Ault is gettin' mighty desperate when they part with that much dinero."

"What do you do to earn it, Sandy?" asked Platte Belton. His gun was pointed at Sandy Land's belly.

"All I got to do," grinned Sandy Land, "is to kill off a Border Patrol ramrod named Jack Craven."

"The hell!" creaked Pappy. "The hell!"

"And that'll be Craven," said Sandy Land, "a-comin' yonder."

But he made no gun move. And he lifted his none too musical voice in song.

"Grind your meal
An' sift your bran.
You'll never make a livin'
In a sandy land!"

Border Patrol Inspector Jack Craven stood in his stirrups and waved his hat. Then came on. He was alone.

"Shove that saddle gun into the scabbard," creaked Pappy. "And h'ist both hands. Or so help me, Satan, I'll kill you, Sandy Land!"

Sandy Land obeyed without word of protest. He had both hands held high when Jack Craven rode up.

PAPPY CRAWFORD stepped out from behind the adobe corral, his gun in his hand. Belton was right behind the old cowman.

"Hogtie this Sandy Land renegade, Jake," Pappy's voice creaked like a rusty hinge. "He's hired out to kill you. Brags that he's got half the bounty money in his pocket."

"Sandy Land," said Jack Craven, "will come in more useful with this gun hand free. Unless he's got Miss Abbie Crawford fooled

bad. And Abbie is almighty hard to fool. You got ary way of identifyin' yourself, Sandy Land?"

"I just sounded off the only proof I pack with me. I hope it's the last time I got to sing that hungry tune. At school the teacher used to gimme a red apple not to join in the chorus. You'll have to take it thataway—or leave it! It ain't exactly wise ner safe to pack anything to identify a man when he trails with a renegade pack like Sorrel's Double Cross Diablito outfit.

"But I kin tell you what was in the confidential letter Abbie Crawford wrote the Governor, who passed the letter on to my boss. She asked him to help her father git back his Pitchfork outfit. And she promised to lay the proof on the line where Sheriff Barney Ault and Chan Cleeter had thrown in with a renegade named Sorrel and the three of 'em owned the Diablito Cattle Company and the Double Cross brand.

"Miss Abbie Crawford wrote she had heard there was a new outfit called the Arizona Rangers and they were all under direct orders and responsible only to the Governor of Arizona Territory. And if the Governor would send his Arizona Rangers to Black River she would lay her proof on the barrelhead. Is that correct?"

"That," said Jack Craven of the Border Patrol, "is plumb correct."

"The Governor," Sandy Land had lowered his hands to his saddle horn where he kept them in plain sight, "checked the bet to the Captain of the Arizona Rangers. The Captain wrote Miss Abbie Crawford a letter.

"It was a confidential letter. She wasn't to show it to anybody. Not even Jake Craven, the Border Patrol Inspector who is her boss. In that letter the Ranger Captain said he had about a dozen men sworn in. No more. And their identity was secret. It had to be, with men like Barney Ault disgracin' the law badge they wore and violatin' their oath of office. . . .

"The Ranger Captain could spare one man. He was sendin' that man into the Diablitos where he would throw in with Sorrel's Double Cross outfit. And there in the Diablitos that Arizona Ranger would stay till he gathered what proof he needed and until the sign was right for him to open the jackpot. Or till he was killed off.

"This Arizona Ranger wouldn't have any name. But when the time come, Miss Abbie Crawford would identify him by a song he sung. An old hungry tune called Sandy Land. And Sandy Land would let her know when it was time for her to dig up her proof. And by that time this Sandy Land Ranger would know if Jake Craven could be bought off or scared off or if he could be trusted to take up his end in a big showdown jackpot.

"I got a note to Miss Abbie Crawford a few nights ago. I told her to dig up her proof and dust it off and tell Jake Craven to show up here at the 'dobe corral an hour before midnight tonight. And now, mister, if you ask me to sing that damned hungry tune once more, I'll risk a gut shot."

Sandy Land pinched out the glowing coal of his short cigarette stub. His grin took in Pappy Crawford and Platte Belton. They were grinning back.

"I reckon," he said, "we might as well sweat a little horseflesh. We're pickin' up the Double Cross at Diablito Pass. When the jackpot opens, you better shoot to kill. We're playin' for keeps."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wipe-Out

DIABLITO PASS was about a mile long and that mile was a narrow canyon, high walled and rocky, that fanned out at the south end in a brushy sand wash. The north end of the pass forked into the rough, broken hills of the Diablitos, and back in the hills another mile or so from the pass were the big mesquite corrals linked together by a long branding chute. And at the big gouged-out spring that never went dry, the water siphoned down to a rock-bound reservoir called Diablito Tank. There was a horse corral and pasture fenced in at the spring and a thick walled adobe cabin. And this was the headquarters ranch of the Double Cross connected outfit.

It had taken all night to shove the drive of stolen Mexican cattle through Diablito Pass. The cattle turned loose on good feed and water were too footsore to stray far. In a few days they could be rounded up and corralled and the Double Cross burned on their hides.

Sorrel and Mex and the Coyote, with the help of the Mexican vaqueros who worked for the rebel outfit that had stolen the cattle from the big Mexican-owned ranch in Sonora, had shoved the cattle through the pass. It was a hard night's work on men and horses. And when the last of the drags had been shoved through the rocky pass Sorrel had given each of the vaqueros a quart of tequila and some money and sent them back.

There had been a little trouble when the Mexican major-domo had refused to deliver the cattle. They had not been paid for. There was another pack train delivery of guns and ammunition to be paid first, he had told Sorrel. And Sorrel had put an abrupt end to the argument by pulling his gun and shooting the major-domo in the belly. That was the one best way, Sorrel told the Mexican vaqueros in their own language, to silence the foolish demands of a stubborn hombre.

With Mex and the Coyote covering them with guns, the vaqueros had to agree that the big red-whiskered gringo Sorrel was right. And they helped shove the cattle they had stolen through the Diablito Pass.

While at the north end of Diablito Pass, Barney Ault and Chan Cleeter tallied the Mexican cattle that came throught. And their tally agreed with that of Sorrel when he had shoved the last drags through and rode up, flanked by Mex and the Coyote, to where Sheriff Barney Ault and Chan Cleeter, ramrod of the Pitchfork outfit, sat their horses in the gray dawn.

"Everybody happy?" Sorrel's bloodshot eyes looked glass green. His red whiskered grin was mirthless. "Or you figger I short-changed you?"

"Sandy Land," said Barney Ault, "shoulda showed up before now."

"You handed him a tough hunk a meat to chaw," said Sorrel. "Jake Craven mighta proved hard to take on. You goin' to set here all day augerin'? Me'n my men has done a week's work last night while you two gentlemen of leisure wore callouses on your saddle rumps tyin' tally knots in your bridle reins. Let's git to the cabin where there's a keg and some grub. I doubt if I kin take your damned big boss medicine on an empty gut. It's no hair off my hide if somebody stole your damned Double Cross books. I kin keep my tallies on a book of cigareet papers. Cash on the barrelhead counts with me. I got Mex an' the Coyote to pay off. Fetch your big dough to the cabin an' count it out on that keg we'll tap. Don't be so damn' spooky. If the decoy hadn't worked we'd a had them dogies stopped there in the pass."

But they were all jumpy, their nerves raw. And at the adobe cabin, fortified by corn whiskey and a breakfast of frijole pinto beans and jerky and strong black coffee, they were still jumpy and ugly tempered.

Mex and the Coyote stood guard outside the adobe cabin. They were half drunk and full of booze and grub and they needed sleep and they sat with their backs against the outside adobe wall, their carbines across their laps. The Coyote's pale eyes were sticky-lidded with sleep and his head kept nodding and his jaw slacked. While Mex's heavy-lidded eyes were slivers of opaque black and the cigarette that hung listlessly from a corner of his mouth was dead.

Inside the cabin the talk had simmered down from boiling argument and blame-shifting to an uneasy silence. Sheriff Barney Ault broke it.

"It was Abbie Crawford that robbed your safe, Cleeter. Your ex-convict forger bookkeeper said it was a kid with a black silk handkerchief pulled up across his face and that the kid had a girlish voice. Abbie Crawford has the nerve to do that job. You lost your temper, Cleeter, and shot the bookkeeper when he fetched you the bad news. That shuts his mouth. Checks him off. If Sandy Land killed Jake Craven, that checks off the Border Patrol Inspector. But Mex and the Coyote didn't kill Pappy Crawford."

"They will," Chan Cleeter cut in sharply. "Or if they don't, I'll get Sorrel to do it. Sorrel kin use the bounty money."

"It'll cost you more than a lousy thousand bucks," said Sorrel, to git shut of Pappy Crawford. I'm sick of dodgin' around in these hills. I'm takin' the ramrod job at the Pitchfork, Chan. You kin take the Double Cross spread in the Diablitos. I'm shavin' my whiskers and puttin' on my town duds and I'm buildin' a hungry loop for the Abbie Crawford filly. That loop ain't a-goin' to miss."

"The hell you say!" Chan Cleeter's pale gray green eyes narrowed.

"How you stoppin' me?" Sorrel's bloodshot eyes stared back.

Sheriff Barney Ault had his chair tilted back against the wall. He studied the two men who were glaring at one another, a smile on his thin-lipped hatchet face. His right hand was on his six-shooter.

SHERIFF BARNEY AULT'S left hand slid in under his denim jacket and came out with a folded paper. He flipped it open and dropped it onto the round-topped poker table so that its bold black lettering showed. It was a reward dodger.

"Before you gents build up your hopes too high," Sheriff Barney Ault's voice was flat-toned, "take a look at that. It's the outlaw pedigree of the two Coulter brothers. Tow-headed Channel Coulter. Red-headed Sorrel Coulter. Wanted for cattle rustling and horse stealing in Montana and Wyoming and both Dakotas. Wanted for the murder of Sheriff Pete Belton at Platte River, Montana."

The Pitchfork ramrod and Big Sorrel, ramrod of the Diablito rustlers, now stared with their hard green eyes at the weazened, hatchet-faced, gimlet-eyed bounty hunter law officer. The resemblance was there now. The brotherly resemblance. It was there in the eyes and the hard grimness of their faces.

The six-shooter in Ault's hand covered them both. His thin-lipped smile was deadly.

"I've kept that reward dodger a long time," Sheriff Barney Ault told them flatly. "Kept it to turn up for a hole card. I kin kill you both before you kin pull a gun. Collect the bounty on your outlaw hides. But if you kin take my orders from here on, you might be allowed to live.

"But you'll be renegades as long as you're both alive. And you'll stay here in the Diabli-

tos. I'll keep my law badge. But I'm ramroddin' the Pitchfork. And while I'm no big, handsome spur-jingler like you two Coulter boys, I'll gamble that Abbie Crawford will be glad to marry me when I tear up the bench warrant I've got for her Pappy Crawford and hand Pappy back his Pitchfork. Nobody is killin' Pappy Crawford unless I take a notion to cut that old cowman down. Pass that along to Mex and the Coyote."

Chan Cleeter and Sorrel, alias Chan and Sorrel Coulter, cut each other quick glances. Then they both stared at the hatchet-faced bounty hunter whose gun covered them.

Outside the adobe cabin Mex and the Coyote no longer kept up any pretense of wary alertness. They were tuckered out and sleeping off the booze they had drunk to keep them going the past two nights.

So they did not see the four men who had left their horses back in the brush and had crept up on foot to surround the place.

The cabin door was open. The windows open. The voices inside the adobe cabin carried plainly in the gray dawn.

"From now on," sounded Ault's flat-toned voice, "Sheriff Barney Ault does the fishin'. You two Coulter boys kin cut bait."

Outside the cabin the Coyote was having a bad dream. Booze gave him nightmare dreams. The booze he drank to give him courage would die out and sour inside his belly and the fear would crawl through his entrails like a cold snake and he'd dream that the men he had murdered had come back to kill him and they would be there staring at him, guns in their hands.

The Coyote's nightmare scream was shrill and it ripped the gray dawn and sent keening echoes rocketing back into the broken hills. He was up on his feet and his pale eyes were open and the gun in his hand exploded as he began shooting crazily at nightmare ghosts.

Mex leaped to his feet. Blinking the sleep from his slitted black eyes. He'd seen the Coyote have those wild terror ridden nightmares. He shouted hoarsely at the tow-headed renegade.

"Come outa it, you locoed Coyote!"

Chan and Sorrel charged out through the open doorway, their guns in their hands. But Barney Ault stayed inside. He had quit his chair with a catlike swiftness and was crouched in a corner, his gun in his hand.

Mex jumped in behind the Coyote. He slapped him hard across the side of his jaw, open-handed slaps that rocked the young renegade's sideways. The Coyote staggered and went to his knees and then lurched to his feet again, awake now, a little dazed and bewildered, bathed in clammy sweat. His pale eyes shifting.

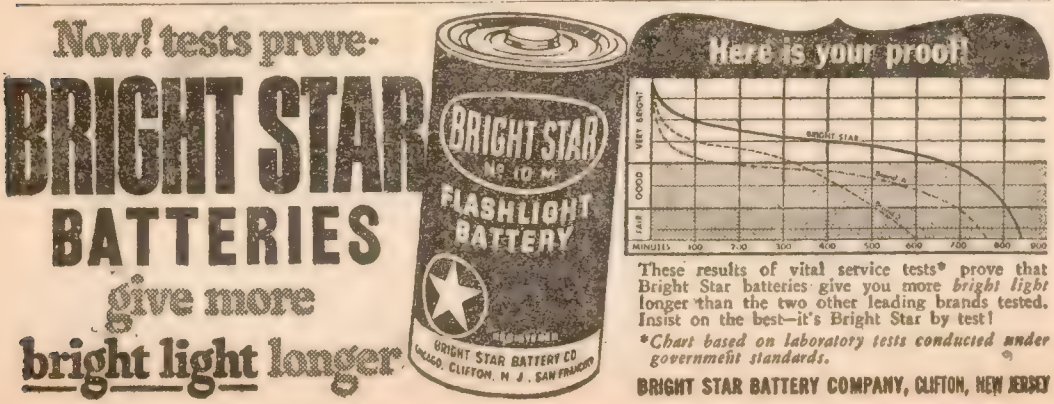
Sandy Land and Jack Craven crouched in behind the heavy brush, their guns gripped, tense as coiled rattlers. Barney Ault was still in the cabin. They wanted him to come outside before they barked a law challenge or fired a gun.

Pappy Crawford thumbed back his gun-hammer as he squatted in behind some manzanita brush.

It was Platte Belton who spoiled the batter. Platte Belton, son of Sheriff Pete Belton up on Platte River in Montana. Sheriff Pete Belton had been killed in cold blood by a pair of outlaw brothers who had ridden into town to get a jug.

They'd caught sight of the law badge pinned to Pete Belton's vest. They'd got scared and shot him down without warning. And Platte had picked up the trail when it was five years cold. He'd followed it down into the Diablitos where he had heard the Coulters had gone. But until he heard Barney Ault's voice there in the cabin, identifying Chan Cleeter and Sorrel as the two Coulter brothers, Platte had no more than a vague suspicion that his trail had warmed up. Now Platte Belton forgot Sandy Land's orders or else he discarded them. He stepped out from behind the brush with his six-shooter in his hand.

"Hell, it's Montana!" Sorrel's voice grated.



"Platte Belton from Montana. You killed Sheriff Pete Belton. He was my father!"

PLATTE BELTON'S six-shooter roared. The .45 slug hit Sorrel in the belly and doubled him up and spoiled Sorrel's aim. His bullet whined past Platte's head. Platte's second shot tore through the crown of Sorrel's hat and smashed through the red-thatched skull and the big renegade was dead when he toppled over onto the ground.

Mex and the Coyote jumped for the open doorway. The door slammed in their faces. Inside the cabin Sheriff Barney Ault had kicked the door shut, then slid the heavy bar into place to hold it closed.

Pappy Crawford would have jumped out from behind the brush but Jake Craven's hand flung the old cowman back.

Chan Cleeter, alias Chan Coulter, hit the brush. Quick-witted, desperate, he'd let Sorrel play his hand out. Chan had no taste for open fighting. Not when he could bush up. He had a saddled horse back in the brush. He was worming his way through the thick manzanita thicket when Platte Belton looked around for him. Platte saw the brush moving and heard it crashing and he went in after Chan like a hound after a wolf.

Mex and the Coyote tried to run for it. Jake Craven rose up out of the brush and the grizzled Pappy Crawford got to his feet and was cussing as he showed himself. The Coyote shot at Pappy and missed. Then Mex and the Coyote and Pappy Crawford and Jake Craven were shooting it out.

Point blank. Shot for shot. Pappy went down with a slug in his leg and then Jake Craven stood erect and the gun in his hand was as steady as if he'd laid the barrel on a rest and he shot twice and Mex and the Coyote went down clawing at their guts and the Border Patrol Inspector kept shooting until Mex and the Coyote were dead. Then Jake Craven re-loaded his smoking six-shooter and shoved it back in its holster and knelt down to tie a crude tourniquet around Pappy Crawford's bullet-ripped leg.

"Hold still you damned old rannyhan, till I twist this tight. Then hold the stick thataway while I lend Platte Belton a hand."

But Platte Belton wanted no man's help. He had located a saddled Pitchfork horse and he crouched there in the brush and waited for the man who had left the horse there. And he had no more than a few seconds to wait. The brush cracked. The big Pitchfork ramrod came at a crouching run. He was reaching for the bridle reins when Belton's voice halted him in his tracks.

"You ain't goin' nowheres, Coulter."

Chan Coulter, alias Chan Cleeter, whirled. He caught a brief glimpse of Platte Belton as Platte came out of the brush. And took a quick snapshot but he was winded from his run and the bullet fanned Platte's jaw and the gun in Platte Belton's hand was spitting fire.

He kept firing as fast as he could thumb back the hammer and pull the trigger. Then the gun-hammer snapped down on an exploded cartridge. He stood there with the empty gun in his hand, powder smoke drifting from its muzzle. He kept thumbing back the gun hammer and pulling the trigger and the gun-hammer snapped down on empty shells.

The big Pitchfork ramrod was still on his feet. He'd been hit three times and he hadn't gone down. His pale, gray-green eyes were silvered and the color was drained from his handsome face and his fancy-tailored gray flannel shirt was blood-stained and the wet blood widening to stain the gray cloth. But he still stood on widespread legs and he was holding his six-shooter in both hands and the gun barrel was lifting.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Bounty-Hunters Collect

THEN off to one side a gun exploded. The Pitchfork ramrod's head jerked sideways. Blood spouted from the bullet hole in his neck, where a .45 slug had torn the jugular vein and broken his spine at the base of his blond skull. His head lobbed over and he went down with a heavy crash. Death reflex jerked his trigger finger. The .45 slug meant for Platte Belton plowed the dirt between the Montana cowboy's widespread feet.

Border Patrol Inspector Jake Craven stepped out of the brush, his smoking six-shooter in his hand.

"Abbie," he grinned faintly, "makes a mighty good cherry pie. I kinda promised her I'd fetch you back home with me."

Sandy Land had not moved from behind the brush. He was watching the cabin door.

Pappy Crawford heard the shooting in the brush. His voice creaked. "You all right, Jake? You, Platte?"

"Quit givin' up head like an old bull that's bin whupped outa the herd!" called Jake Craven. "It's all over now but the braggin'. Chan's laid down the big Pitchfork."

"What shape you in, son?"

"I ain't even bullet-nicked, Pappy."

Jake Craven and Platte crashed through the brush and back to where Pappy Crawford was sitting up, cussing his pain and holding the tourniquet stick. The Border Patrol Inspector gave Platte and the wounded cowman a meaning look. His voice lifted.

"Grit your teeth, Pappy. We'll have to pack you to the cabin. We got 'em all! This cleans

up the Diablitos. And it don't look like Sheriff Jake Ault, fer all his trap-settin', got in on the kill for ary of that bounty money!"

The ruse worked. The cabin door opened. Barney Ault stood there in the doorway, his six-shooter in his right hand. He rubbed the heel of his left hand across the nickle-plated sheriff's star pinned to his shirt.

"I trapped 'em, Craven. I had to kinda throw in with the Double Cross to work it. I had the two Coulters held up with my gun when the Coyote throwed his fit and you fellers taken the play away."

Sheriff Barney Ault's voice trailed into silence. His flat-toned declaration had been interrupted. From behind the thick manzanita brush came the sound of a not very musical voice singing a song.

"Grind your meal
An' sift your bran.
You'll never make a livin'
In a sandy land!"

Sandy Land had slipped back and gotten his horse and now he rode into plain view.

"There's that Sandy Land renegade!" Barney Ault's voice sounded brittle.

"Sandy Land," Border Patrol Inspector Jake Craven said quietly, "is an Arizona Ranger."

Sheriff Barney Ault knew when he held a losing hand. But he played it like he held aces. Bounty hunter killer, cold-blooded, merciless, he expected no quarter. And asked for none. He had time to step back inside and slam the door and make it a siege until they smoked him out. But he chose to play his tough hand out according to his lights. There was a faint smile on his thin-lipped hatchet face as he stepped out with his six-shooter in his hand and waited for the Arizona Ranger to ride up within range.

Sandy Land was playing it the same way. He could have used his saddle gun to kill Barney Ault. Could have done the job from the brush. But he shoved the carbine into its saddle scabbard and drew his six-shooter and when he got up within small arms distance he reined up.

"I'd hate to git a borrowed horse shot from under me," said Sandy Land. He dismounted and turned the horse loose.

"Jake Craven," said Sandy Land, "will lift his hat. When he drops it, we wait till it hits the ground."

Jake Craven stood to one side and lifted his hat. He held it high. Then let go of it. The hat dropped.

THE two guns exploded at almost the same second. Both bullets hit. Both men stood on their feet for a long moment and the gun echoes died. Barney Ault's gray hatchet face never changed expression. His beady eyes never winked. But it was a death mask now. There was a widening stain and a bit of bullet-torn nickle-plated metal badge dangled across the hole in his shirt and the widening red stain where a .45 slug had crashed through his lean ribs and torn his heart to shreds. Then his bowed banty legs sagged and Sheriff Barney Ault went down in a shapeless heap.

Sandy Land sat down like a man who has become suddenly too tired and played out to stand on his legs any more. The healthy color drained from his square-jawed face. His blue

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eyes puckered. He laid his gun on the ground beside him and used both hands to pull his shirt up from the waistband of his faded levis. His hands were red with blood. He wore no undershirt and his shirt-tail was sodden with blood. It flowed sluggishly from a bullet rip below his waistband.

Platte Belton got there first. He told Sandy Land to lie back and he worked swiftly at the metal buttons. There was a lot of blood spilling from the bullet gash in the Ranger's flank.

"If that's clean red blood, Platte," Sandy Land's voice was quiet, "I'm all right. If it's ripped my tripes, you gents ride off a ways." He was gripping his gun with a sweaty palm.

Jake Craven fetched water and clean bandages and a jug of whiskey. Platte Belton worked without a wasted motion. Cleansing the wound.

He looked straight into the puckered blue eyes of the Arizona Ranger.

"It's all clean red blood. Through the flank. Glanced off your hip bone. Now take a long pull at that jug and lay back. A man can't do much of a job with you reared up thataway."

Sandy Land let go of his gun and wiped the sweat from the palm of his hand and helped Jake Craven hold the jug to his mouth. When he had gulped down a few big swallows of raw whiskey he grinned and lay back.

Platte grinned back at the wounded Ranger and began to bandage the bullet wound.

Jake Craven carried the jug over to where Pappy Crawford sat with his back propped against the trunk of a big mesquite tree.

Pappy waved the jug away with a wide sweep of his long arm. A hard bright twinkle in his faded blue eyes.

"If you'll fetch me a hatfull of erick water," he creaked, "I'll go to work on it. I've reached fer my last jug."

They put the two wounded men on bunks in the adobe cabin and Jake Craven said he'd stay and ride herd on 'em so they wouldn't stray off. While Platte Belton rode to Black River and fetched the doctor. Not that a doc could do any more than had been done. And both Pappy Crawford and Sandy Land were already betting who would be the first to get up and onto a horse.

"Abbie will be comin' back with you and the doc," said Jake Craven. "She's a nurse and a good 'un. And Pappy's too prideful to ask you to fetch her. She'll come back with you. Nothin' in the world kin stop her from comin' to nurse that pappy of hers. She'll be ridin' nurse herd on Sandy Land. He's a handsome feller. If I was you I'd make what time I could on the ride back here."

"Sandy Land," the Arizona Ranger shoved his head out the cabin window, "has a wife an' two kids at Tucson. You wire the Ranger Captain, Platte, to tell my missus I'll be home in a week-ten days. Wire him to notify the Pitchfork owners at Kansas City that their new ramrod is Platte Belton, from Montana. If you'll take the job."

"The Pitchfork goes back to Pappy Crawford," said Platte.

"The hell it does!" creaked Pappy. "I'll run the home ranch. But I'm too old to make a hand in the rough country. And the Pitchfork takes in the Diablitos, now there's no renegades left to dispute it. That about right, Jake?"

"That's correct. You got a job, Platte. Them Mexican cattle to put in the Pitchfork iron. Tallied and paid for when you git a-holt of the Pitchfork checkbook. Ramroddin' the Pitchfork and cleanin' up the remnants of the Double Cross is a young man's job. Me'n Pappy will set back in the shade, now I kin report to Uncle Sam I got the gaps in the Diablito strip of Mexican Border plugged. Anything to keep you from takin' the Pitchfork by its big handle, Platte?" He put the question quickly.

"Not a thing in the world. I sold my two-bit outfit in Montana when I taken the trail of the two Coulters."

"Then take the news to Abbie Crawford at Black River. Tell her to turn them books she taken from the Pitchfork safe over to their Kansas City auditor when he gits there. And you kin tell her she's fired. That new green hand I got is a college feller. You got to pass a regular college examination now to git a job on the Border Patrol. So I'm quittin' my job to help Pappy hold down the cool shade somewheres. So I'll just fire Abbie while I still got authority. Not even Abbie Crawford kin hold down two full time jobs. And bakin' a cherry pie fer Platte Belton is bound to take all the time Abbie is goin' to have on her hands fer a long, long time. Hit the trail, son." Lemme know how you're makin' out ten years from now."

Belton rode alone through the Diablitos. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The dust devils called diablitos spiraled up into the warm still desert air. A man could get lost in the Diablitos. . . . But a man could find himself down here.

It was his range now and from now on. Platte Belton from Montana, ramrod of the Pitchfork outfit! And at Black River was a girl with black hair and blue eyes waiting for him. He'd ask her to marry him and he somehow knew that she was expecting it and what her answer would be. It had been decided once and for all when they met that one and only time.

THE END

HUNDRED-DOLLAR EPITAPH

By WILLIAM BENTON JOHNSTON

Security, peace and honest work were Kirby Sharpe's, provided the cards fell right, in his last trouble-shooting chore: The grim job at Mesa Grande. . . . And his tinhorn boss already knew how Sharpe's epitaph would read!

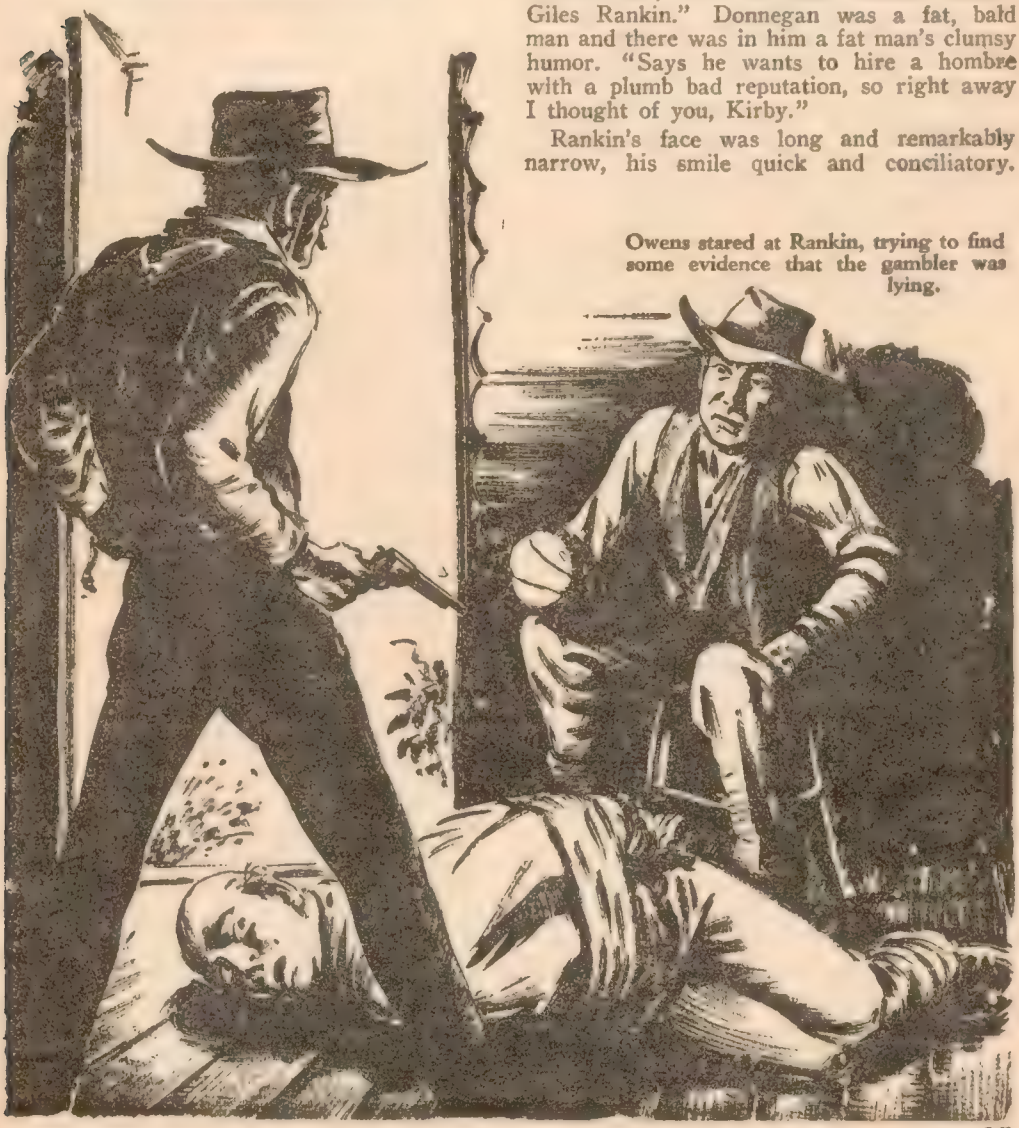
THIS late afternoon when Kirby Sharpe entered the Open Door Saloon the place was empty of customers and Phil Donnegan stood idle behind the bar.

"You wanted to see me?" Kirby asked.

Donnegan nodded and walked back to his office. He opened the door and the man waiting there stood up.

"This gent," Donnegan said by way of introduction, "is from Mesa Grande—name's Giles Rankin." Donnegan was a fat, bald man and there was in him a fat man's clumsy humor. "Says he wants to hire a hombre with a plumb bad reputation, so right away I thought of you, Kirby."

Rankin's face was long and remarkably narrow, his smile quick and conciliatory.



Owens stared at Rankin, trying to find some evidence that the gambler was lying.

"No offense meant," he told Kirby.

"None taken," Kirby said. "What do you want done and how much is there in it?"

Donnegan went out, closing the door. Rankin sat down again.

Kirby Sharpe was a reserved and taciturn man. Without further talk, he studied Rankin in a cool, detached manner. Rankin's lips continued their smiling, yet his dark, close-set eyes were cold and probingly keen and Kirby found something sinister beneath the sly, more obvious shrewdness of the man.

Rankin was, at the same time, appraising Kirby. Consequently there lay between them a brief interval of silence.

Finally Rankin said, "The job won't be any trouble. The pay: two hundred dollars."

He paused and Kirby waited without comment.

"I own a freight line," Rankin continued. "My business is hauling out corn and wheat and hauling in meal and flour. A man named Lester Owens has moved in from St. Jo and opened a grist mill. I want him run out of town. That will be an easy job for a man—a man—"

"With a bad reputation," Kirby interposed.

Rankin winked. "A quarrel, a little threat and Owens will go high-tailing back to Missouri."

Kirby sat lightly upon the desk edge. "Suppose he doesn't scare?"

"He will," Rankin assured him. "Anyhow, backing it up ain't in the bargain. You find an excuse to quarrel with Owens and threaten him and your job is done. One hundred now and the other when you get out of Mesa Grande."

Kirby's regard of Rankin turned quizzical, "Suppose I quarrel with Owens and threaten him, then his new mill happens to burn down? It wouldn't look good for a stranger in town—a stranger with a bad reputation."

Rankin's sallow cheeks flushed darkly, his eyes for a moment sullen with resentment. Then he relaxed, showing his smile again. "No tricks, mister—a promise you can hold me to."

"That," said Kirby smoothly, "is exactly what I'll do. All right, when do I leave?"

Rankin counted out a hundred dollars. "I'm going tonight; you can come along in the morning. Don't recognize me in Mesa Grande or try to contact me until you are ready to leave."

Kirby nodded, ignored Rankin's proffered hand and left the saloon. Crossing the street, there arose in him an old bitterness and self-contempt. He felt a peculiar resentment at Donnegan's clumsy joke and of Rankin's careful appraisal. He thought: A man drifts along and what he does and how he lives begins to show in his face and in his manner. People see it and keep reminding him of it until finally he accepts it himself and after that there's no turning back.

Why hadn't he told Rankin, "No, I won't do your dirty work, but I'll take a job driving one of your freight wagons or sweeping your office floor?" He had not gone too far to turn back and he had a definite reason for making such a change; every day's delay was foolish beyond understanding. Yet the lure of money quickly made was strong, and procrastination an easy compromise. After all, two hundred dollars represented many tedious days of wagon driving or office sweeping. Kirby shrugged and turned in at Brandon's Palace.

THE big dance floor was deserted except for waiters now and then crossing it to ready their tables for the night's business. Intermittent bursts of shrill laughter and frequent staccato tappings of high, hard heels came from the rooms above. Charlie Stiles was already at the piano, his fingers idly touching the keys with a medley varying from rollicking *Buffalo Gals* to doleful *My Darling Nellie Gray.*

Tom Brandon was in his cashier's cage and Kirby crossed the room to pass seventy-five dollars through the cage window.

"Add that," he said, "to Ellen's salary. As usual, don't tell her where it came from—and don't ever be fool enough to mention it to anyone else."

Brandon shook his head. "I always tell her it's a bonus; I don't whisper a word to nobody, Kirby."

Kirby showed Brandon a cold, narrow-eyed interest. "Folks might get ideas," he said in one tone above a whisper. "You might even get ideas yourself."

"No—hell, no," Brandon told him hastily. "I think it's a fine, gentlemanly thing. I think—"

Kirby said, "All right, Tom," and turned away to the stairs.

He went along the narrow, second floor corridor and tapped on Ellen's door.

She said, "Just a minute, Kirby," and in a moment there was a click of the door's bolt.

Ellen Miles was a small girl, almost doll-like in her full skirt, with its lace bodice tight across her firm, high breasts. Her skin was fair and in attractive contrast to the blackness of her hair and eyes. She had lighted her lamp against the day's coming darkness and now, standing in the doorway with that saffron light back of her, she was as lovely as a cameo in relief against old, yellowed ivory.

"How did you know who it was?" Kirby asked.

Ellen smiled and moved back, inviting him in. "You're the only one in Raider's Gap with

the politeness to knock; all the others try to shove the door down and come right on in."

"That's what I hate about your being in a place like this," he told her. "You're too nice and sweet to—"

"To sing a few songs downstairs each night?" she interrupted lightly. "There are women in Raider's Gap with worse jobs than that."

"Yes," Kirby agreed, "and some of them live right here on the same floor with you. If I were worth a damn, I would have had you out of here long ago."

This was an old and futile topic to Ellen, a thoughtful girl with the composure to cover with silence subjects she did not consider opportune. She turned to her dressing table.

Kirby pitched his hat on the bed and sat in a chair by the window. Ellen, watching him in the dressing table mirror, saw the yellow shine of his hair and how deeply blue his eyes were. He was wiry and lightly built and there was about him a tautness rarely loosened, but now he stretched his legs and relaxed.

Smoke from his cigarette made a slow fragrant drift across the room. Outside, the streets were quiet with the lull of early evening, and the piano in the room below lifted its music softly in the gathering twilight. Ellen had put a towel about her shoulders and her hair lay across this, shining darkly beneath the strokes of her brush. Looking at her, Kirby saw that she was everything he wanted a woman to be and there stirred in him a deep regret for the many things he had done and had, throughout the years, failed to do.

"I want to kiss you," he said and sat still, watching her turn and smile at him.

She said, "Lazy," crossed the room and knelt beside his chair, the heavy taffeta of her skirt rustling sharply.

HER lips pressed warmly against his, and her shoulders were firm and smooth beneath the arm he placed around her. Presently she put her cheek against his and they were like that a long, restless interval.

After a while she said, "I have to be downstairs soon."

"I know." He moved his arm so that she could stand up. "I'm going to Mesa Grande tomorrow," he told her.

"To work?" she asked quickly. "You have a job there?"

"No—not what you'd call a job." He saw the eagerness fade from her features and added, with gentle regret, "I'm sorry."

She turned to the dressing table and Kirby got up and stood behind her, watching her deft fingers and now and then glancing at her face reflected in the lamp-lighted mirror.

"Why," he asked, "does a man keep following a trail that leads away from those things he wants most? Is habit that strong, or some men that weak? But you wouldn't know the answer to that."

"I *do* know," she told him. "My father came West to plant wheat in Oregon; instead, he became a prospector and followed the phantom of easy gold.

"My mother died, my sister and I had finally to shift for ourselves, yet Father went on and on, with perfect faith that someday one stroke of fortune would make everything right."

She paused and Kirby said, "I'm going to be wiser than your father. Next spring—maybe sooner— I'm going to get a job; any kind of a steady job."

There was a sad compassion in Ellen's faint smiling. "Father thought of doing that so often. He'd say, 'Tomorrow or next week I'll strike it rich. If I don't, I'll quit then and plant a crop of wheat'. But there was always another tomorrow and another next week."

Kirby touched her shoulders lightly. "If you think of me in that way, why did you fall in love with me?"

"That," she admitted, "I do *not* know." She got up and walked to the window and in a moment said, "Come here, Kirby," and he went to stand beside her.

This window faced westward and in that direction was the far, flat run of the desert. Dusk had given way to a night which lay in a smother of blackness across the land, and above this, the Evening Star was like a cross of bright silver against the darkened sky.

Ellen said, "After a while other stars will be out—thousands of them lighting the heavens—but now there is only one star in the night." Her hand found his and he felt the warm, steady pressure of her fingers. "There's been so much darkness and disappointment in my life, Kirby; your love is the one bright and happy thing I've ever known. That's why I fell in love with you. The lack of a home and security and children does not change my love, yet because these are things close to a woman's heart, I hope for them to come later—like the other stars which will come out when this night is older."

She laughed. "Perhaps I am a little like my father, after all."

Something tightened and filled Kirby's throat until he was afraid to trust himself with words. Gently he lifted Ellen's hand and touched it to his lips. Then he moved back from her, picked up his hat and left the room, closing the door softly and seeing that she still stood by the window.

THE following afternoon, Kirby stepped from the train at the Mesa Grande station. He went to the hotel and registered and after

that he strolled leisurely about, habitual caution impelling him to fix in his mind this town's pattern of buildings and streets and alleys.

Walking down to the river he saw the recently-constructed mill and farther up the slope a new dwelling, its white paint and green shutters sharply in contrast to the town's other weathered adobe and frame structures.

Going back, he stopped at the Cattleman's Saloon and had a drink, after which he returned to the hotel. The day's oppressive heat had lessened and there was a light breeze along the hotel's east-facing porch. Kirby took one of the chairs there.

An old man in an adjoining chair filled a battered black pipe, then fumbled through his pockets.

"No dang fire," he grumbled in a high, querulous voice.

Kirby held out a match and the old man peered at him with watery, myopic eyes.

"Stranger, ain't ye?"

Kirby said, "Maybe."

"Ain't no wise inquisitive," the old man assured him. "I just know most folks hereabouts and your face didn't seem familiar." He lit his pipe and sucked noisily at it. "This here's a good town—best dang town on the river."

Kirby asked idly, "Lived here all your life?"

"Not yet I ain't," the old man replied, puffing at his pipe again.

Kirby chuckled, and for a while they sat smoking quietly and watching shadows lengthen along the street.

Presently activities of early evening stirred through Mesa Grande. Supper time drew near and now and then customers came up the porch steps and entered the hotel.

"That was Sam Jacks," the old man told Kirby. "Runs the Cattleman's—keeps good likker, Sam does."

Two other men followed Jacks across the porch, their talk interspersed with laughter.

The old man grinned. "Jim Macon and some drummer, telling jokes."

The old man's comments ran on. Kirby listened and said nothing, yet showed his companion a polite and encouraging interest.

Giles Rankin came along the street and entered the hotel.

The old man said, "That's Rankin—gambles and does a mite of hauling."

"I guess," Kirby said casually, "the new grist mill has about put his freight line out of business."

The old man shook his head. "No. Trey Wilson does all the real freighting out of here. Rankin ain't got but two wagons and runs them for a front, so he can call himself a freighter."

Inside the hotel, the supper triangle sent its metallic vibrations sounding and echoing through the evening's stillness.

"Let's eat," Kirby suggested. "The suppers are on me."

The old man tapped his pipe against the porch railing. "Obliged to you," he said, and followed Kirby Sharpe into the dining room.

Presently a man and a woman came in, the man squat and broad-shouldered and stooped, his head bald except for a fringe of graying hair. The woman was tall and buxom. She walked with an insolent and practiced grace and the lights brought out the blond sheen of her hair. Her glance appraised the room, paused briefly upon Giles Rankin's table and then she sat down, smiling faintly and mysteriously.

"That," said Kirby's companion, "is the owner of the new grist mill, and his wife—name's Owens. She's a lot younger than him. Picked her kinda green, huh?"

Kirby said, "I wouldn't know about that," and gave his attention to the meal being placed before him.

He and the old man ate in silence, Kirby now and then casting deceptively careless glances about the room.

He saw that Lester Owens concentrated wholly upon his food, but that Mrs. Owens' interest frequently swung to Rankin. Further, he placed an instant evaluation upon Rankin's surreptitious response and upon the intimate and wordless messages which passed between these two.

HIS observations also netted some knowledge of the miller's character. A man stopped at Owens' table, spoke politely and received an irritable reply. Later, a waitress was not prompt in answering Owens' beckoned summons and the miller reprimanded her loudly.

Thereupon Kirby stood up, said *"Buenos noches"* to his companion and walked toward the desk,

Half-way across the room he made an awkward stumble and lurched heavily against Owens' table. Owens shoved back his chair and got up, his face choleric.

"Damn it," he shouted, "watch where you're going!"

Kirby bowed to Mrs. Owens. "Your pardon, ma'am."

"Pardon hell!" Owens retorted. "Why don't you drunks stay out of decent places? A man can't—"

Without any show of anger, Kirby grasped the lapels of Owens' coat, pulled the miller forward and slapped his face sharply.

"Mister," he said evenly, "you talk too much and too loud." He slapped Owens

again. "Because there's a lady present and because you're not wearing a gun, I'll give you a little warning." He shoved Owens and the miller sat down heavily. "When we meet again be ready to eat what you've said tonight —word by word."

Owens saw the cold, unblinking stare in Kirby's eyes, and heard the instant stillness of the dining room. Yet he was an irascible man and his anger gave way reluctantly to fear.

"Won't apologize," he muttered. "Damned if I do."

That fitted Kirby's plan exactly. "Then buckle on a gun," he told Owens. "I've got an idea this town's not big enough for both of us." He said again to Mrs. Owens, "My apologies, ma'am."

At the desk he paid for his and the old man's suppers, then went unhurriedly up the stairs to his room.

"Hell of a way," he told himself, "to make two hundred dollars."

He was stretched out across the bed, smoking and watching the last light of day fade from the windows when a slight tapping sounded against the door. Kirby got up and let Giles Rankin in.

"Good job," Rankin whispered. "You scared hell out of him."

Kirby said, "How about the other hundred?"

"Tomorrow," Rankin promised. "In the morning, walk down the river road past the first bend and wait there by the cottonwoods. I'll be along by six o'clock and pick you up in my buckboard, pay you and put you on the train at the next station. It would spoil everything to let Owens know you're leaving Mesa Grande."

After Rankin had gone, Kirby sat there, feeling some hidden and deadly menace in the man's manner and speech. This strengthened into a suspicion too certain to be ignored. Leaving the lamp burning, Kirby left the room, moved quietly down the back stairs and out to the alley.

At Owens' mill, light spilled out the open door on a wagon loading at the platform. Kirby made his way down the slope and edged along the wall of the building. Cautiously he peered around the corner.

Giles Rankin stood just inside the mill door, watching the driver of his wagon help Lester Owens load bags of meal.

Owens stopped before Rankin, wiped the perspiration from his face. "You've never bought a load of meal from me before; where are you taking it?"

"South." Rankin replied.

The driver was now directly behind Owens. He took a sand-bag from his shirt front and looked at Rankin. Rankin nodded and the driver swung the sand-bag and brought it down on the miller's head. Owens dropped without a sound.

Quickly the two men bound and gagged the miller, took him out of the wagon and covered him with bags of meal.

Rankin told the driver, "Drive by the shack and leave him, then go on to Nogales with your load. Test his ropes and gag and see that he don't smother under them sacks. I want him alive in the morning."

The driver nodded and the wagon rolled away, the sounds of its going muffled in the deep dust. Rankin stepped back inside the mill, extinguished the light and walked up to the Owens' residence. He entered without knocking.

Whereupon Kirby left the shadows of the mill wall and went back toward the hotel. He did not immediately return to his room, but skirted the hotel building and went up to the town's main street, walking slowly and thoughtfully.

AT FIVE o'clock the next morning he made his way along the road leading to the river. His right arm was bandaged and in splints, and held across his chest in a sling. His holster had been shifted to the other side, where it hung awkwardly, the butt of the revolver turned forward. He rounded the first bend and came to a clump of cottonwoods. There, he waited.

Presently Giles Rankin drove up in his buckboard, his gaze centering instantly on Kirby's bandaged arm.

"What the hell?" he asked.

Kirby shrugged his left shoulder. "A little trouble in town last night—had to get a doc to set the broken bone."

Rankin said, "Too bad," and Kirby saw in his eyes a quick, cold calculation. Then his features lighted as if he were pleased by Kirby's misfortune. But this was an expression swiftly gone and he said again, "Too bad."

Kirby stepped up to the buckboard seat and Rankin spoke to the team. Presently they turned off the main trail, crossed a low hill and stopped before an old, dilapidated line shack.

"Got to see a fellow," Rankin explained. "Won't be but a minute—here, hold the lines."

Kirby took the lines in his left hand and thus was completely at the mercy of Rankin's next move. For Rankin instantly seized Kirby's revolver, yanked the weapon from its holster and left the buckboard in a quick step backwards. He cocked the gun and waited like that for Kirby to ask questions.

But there were no questions. Kirby's eyes narrowed slightly and became very still. That was all.

"You're a cool one," Rankin admitted. "Get out and hitch the horses to that mesquite."

Kirby climbed down from the buckboard and hitched the team, using his left hand clumsily. Then, obeying Rankin's gesture, he walked to the cabin door, pushed it open and went inside.

There was a pine board table and two stools in the dusty room; beyond these Lester Owens lay on the floor, bound and gagged. Owens' eyes were round and sick with fear. Perspiration streamed from his face, and low, moaning sounds came faintly through the gag.

Kirby sat on the stool at the near side of the table and loosened the sling to stretch out his bandaged arm.

"Buckboard jarred it up a little," he said.

Without replying, Rankin crossed to Owens and roughly jerked the gag from his mouth. Owens rolled over, swallowing and wetting his lips.

"Why are you treating me this way?" he asked. "You pretended to be friendly to my wife—"

Rankin's laughter was a short, harsh sound, "You fool—you poor damn' fool." He stood there, his legs spread wide. "You married a woman twenty years younger than you are. As soon as I saw her, I wanted her and pretty soon she wanted me, too; both of us want your money. So we began making plans to get it and get rid of you at the same time."

"No," Owens whispered hoarsely. "No—that couldn't be true about Lila."

Rankin laughed again, that same brief, unpleasant sound.

"All the folks in this town knew about Lila and me except Owens himself," he told Kirby. "That's why I have to cover up killing the old idiot. So I came to Raider's Gap and you swallowed my yarn, hook, line and sinker. Now everybody in Mesa Grande knows you two quarreled, that you are a bad hombre and have threatened Owens. So when they find your bodies out here—you killed with his six-shooter and him killed with yours—they won't think anything except you two met up and shot it out. With Owens dead, Lila will get his money—and I'll marry Lila."

Owens stared at Rankin, piteously trying to find in his features some evidence that the gambler was lying. Slowly he shook his head and put his face on the cabin floor.

Rankin took the nickle-plated revolver from his pocket. "See," he jeered at the miller, "here's your gun Lila gave me last night."

Owens rubbed his cheek against the floor and said nothing.

Rankin held Owens' revolver in one hand, Kirby's long-barreled Colt in the other. His eyes turned cold with wicked purpose. Deliberately he raised Kirby's weapon and took unhurried aim at Owens' chest.

Kirby shifted his splint and bandaged encased arm until it was directly in line with Rankin's body. He said, "Wait a minute; you overlooked something."

RANKIN turned his head, not moving the revolver aimed at Owens. "Not me. I didn't overlook a thing, mister—the whole thing's perfect."

Kirby said again, "You overlooked something. You came to Raider's Gap to hire a man with a bad reputation—that fitted into your plan, but you overlooked that such men don't live long in the Territory unless they have learned some shrewdness and a lot of suspicion.

Kirby's gaze was steady upon Rankin and in his eyes was a smoky stillness.

"I never believed your story," Kirby told him. "I learned that you didn't run a regular freight line. I saw what was going on between you and Mrs. Owens. I was at the mill last night when you slugged Owens and put him in the wagon. I expected to be brought here."

Amazement showed on Rankin's features, this giving way to scorn.

"Like hell," he said. "And what do you think you can do about it?"

Kirby moved his bandaged arm. "I didn't have any trouble in town last night and my arm isn't broken. I got bandages and splints from Doc Swayne and fixed it up myself. In my hand is a .41 derringer—all that's between you and the muzzle is a thin layer of gauze."

"A bluff—a lying bluff," Rankin told him. Again he started to swing the gun in his hand. Instantly a metallic click sounded.

"The derringer is cocked," Kirby said.

Rankin said again, "A bluff."

Yet the sound of the derringer being cocked was unmistakable. Sweat began to make a wet shine across Rankin's brow.

Outside the cabin, a breeze turned the leaves of the cottonwoods to a faint rustling; one of the horses hitched to the buckboard stamped impatiently at flies.

Kirby said suddenly, with whip-like sharpness, "Drop that gun!"

The Colt in Rankin's hand slipped from his nerveless fingers; Owens' nickle-plated revolver fell from his lap and clattered against the floor. He shrank back a step or two, his hands half-raised.

Kirby stood up, unwrapped his arm and exposed the derringer in his right hand.

"Move back against the wall and get 'em up higher," he said to Rankin. He transferred the derringer to his left hand, got out his knife and cut away Owens' bonds.

"Rub circulation back into your arms and ankles," he told the miller. "Then tie Rankin up and let's get him down to the sheriff."

* * *

Late that afternoon, Kirby sat with Lester Owens on the porch of the grist mill in Mesa Grande.

"I'm not staying in this country another day," Owens said bitterly. "I have sent my wife to the hotel and tomorrow I'm taking her back to her people. I'm going to get a divorce and stay East where I belong. I wish you'd buy the mill and the house—you could be as happy in it, as I had *planned* to be. You saved my life and I'm grateful; you could pay me a little each year, as you make it."

Kirby flipped his cigarette out toward the river. "I'll think about it," he promised.

He left the mill, still confused as to the manner in which he had handled Giles Rankin. Once he would have shot Rankin without hesitancy or compunction, yet today he had brought the man in and left his punishment to the law.

After supper, he stood on the slope south of town. Beneath him was Owens' mill, pale gray in the early moonlight. In the little white house, where the miller was sadly packing his belongings, lamplight made a warm bright glow against the windows. There was a faint wash of the river against its banks, and a small breeze moved through the night.

Memories of Ellen were strong upon Kirby and he remembered how she had looked, standing there at the window of her room in Raider's Gap. There came to him the words she had spoken: " . . . the lack of a home and security and children does not change my love, yet because these things are things close to a woman's heart, I hope for them to come later. . . ."

Within Kirby rose a deep and perfect understanding of all she had said to him. The mill and the white house, this prospect of respectability and of seeing Ellen every day would be his one star and the brightness of it would fill all his wants and hopes.

He turned down the slope, then up to Owens' house.

"Let's draw up that contract," he told the miller. "I'll sign the notes in the morning."

Owens patted Kirby's shoulder. "Good. This is a young man's country; you will do well here. There is corn in the bins, you can begin work tomorrow."

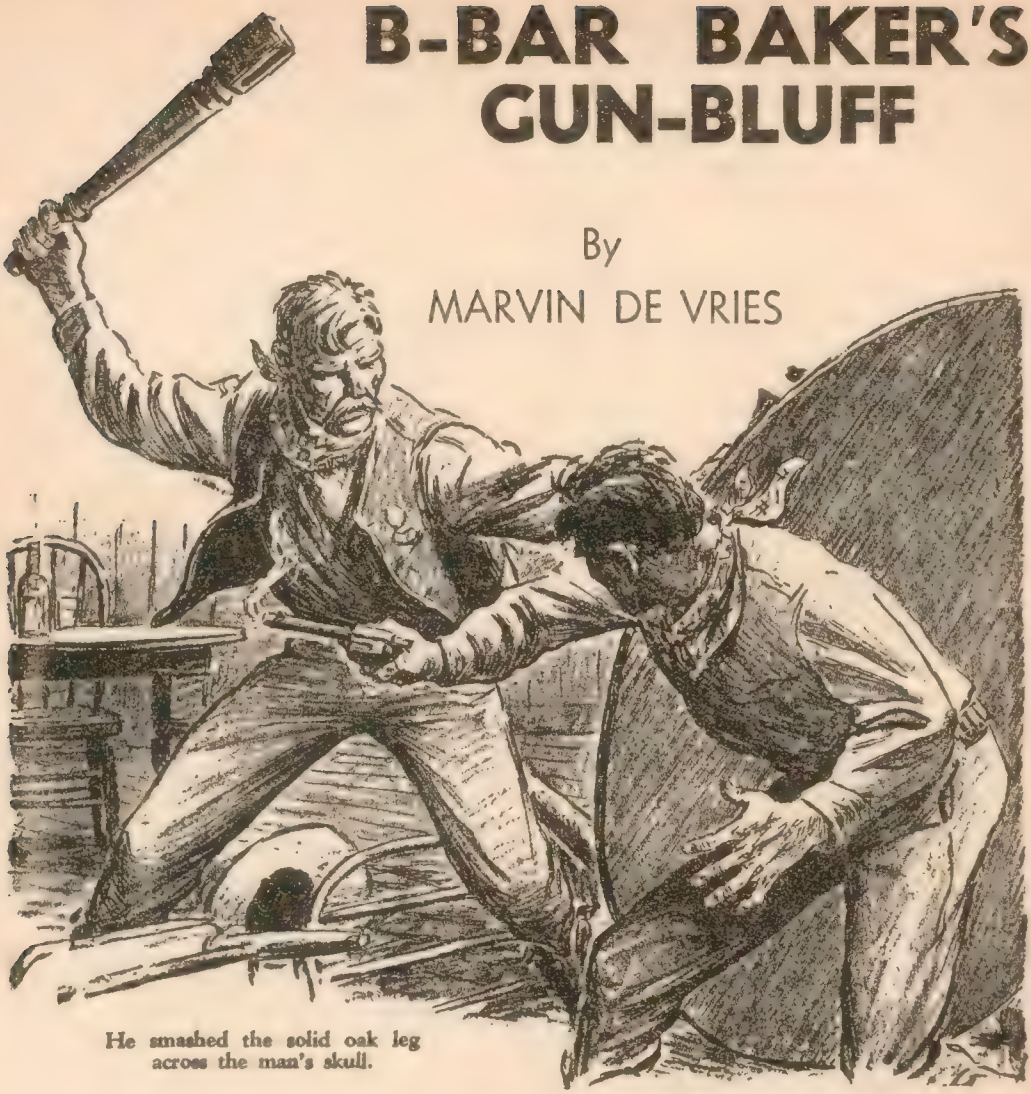
Kirby shook his head. "I'm going for Ellen tomorrow. I'll start the mill next week."

"Ellen is your wife?" Owens asked.

Kirby smiled. "No," he said, "but she will be when we get back from Raider's Gap."

B-BAR BAKER'S GUN-BLUFF

By MARVIN DE VRIES



He smashed the solid oak leg across the man's skull.

CHAPTER ONE

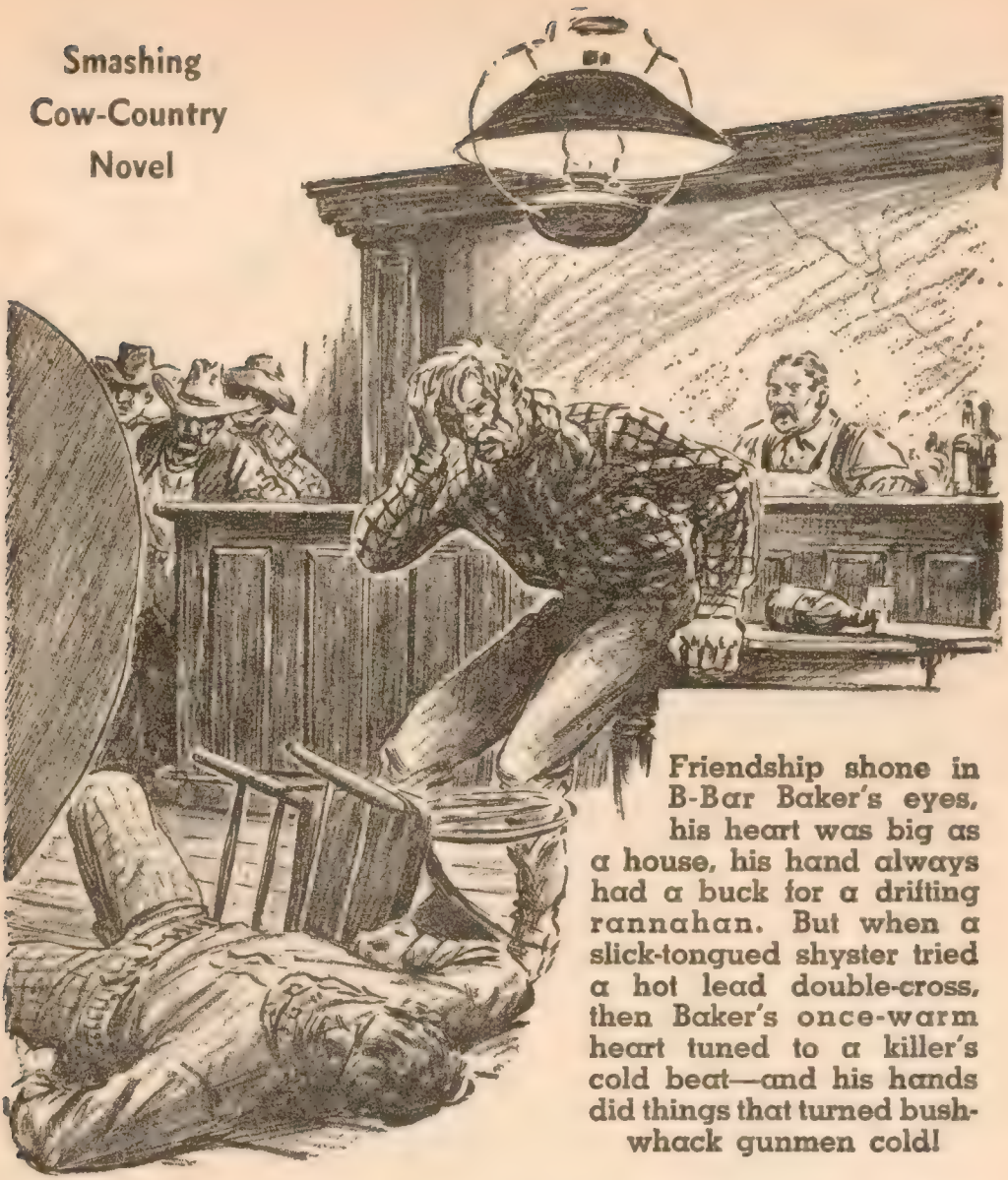
Buckboard Boothill

JULY BAKER followed the ambling sign of the shod horse up and over the hogback until it blurred with the trammel of his own unshod broncs. There he lost it, and a dark scowl settled on his face.

"Mebbe it's time to sound off in town again, an' lay down my law to rustlers," he told himself. "Sometime when that old hellion, Cy Perdotte, is around." This was B-Bar 13 range. He hadn't lost a horse to rustlers in a year, not since he had publicly told off Cy Perdotte, and threatened to gut-shoot him on sight. Cy had kept out of reach, far on the edges of Horseshoe Valley, where he ran a two-bit spread with his boy, Sonny.

The truth was, July wasn't worried about Cy. What really made him

Smashing Cow-Country Novel



Friendship shone in B-Bar Baker's eyes, his heart was big as a house, his hand always had a buck for a drifting rannahan. But when a slick-tongued shyster tried a hot lead double-cross, then Baker's once-warm heart tuned to a killer's cold beat—and his hands did things that turned bush-whack gunmen cold!

cranky was that something was building up against him that he couldn't put his finger on. It was a shadow across his path, a menace that touched him suddenly like a gust of wind, like these hoofmarks blurring out before he could reach the end of the trail they made, and account for it to his own satisfaction.

He had the uneasy feeling that a lot of little things that had happened would finally all add up, and crash down on him like an avalanche. The trail of a shod horse, talk that stopped when he came into the Saddle Bar at Roaring Rain, gun hands who tried to look like drifting buckaroos on Stark Sabo's neighboring Bell & Ball.

"Who the hell they tryin' to fool," he muttered, pulling up, and turning back, "me, or Sabo, or somebody else?"

He began to think of Cy Perdotte again, and the real fear he had thrown into the chronic rustler. He had probably overdone it, meaning only to scare him off B-Bar 13 range, not clear out of his wits.

"Poor old buzzard," he muttered, half-regretfully. "I better tell him sometime I changed my mind about gut-shootin' him. I'll

tell him I won't do more'n shoot off his ears."

Suddenly, his horse boogered and almost threw him. For a second, he couldn't find out why. A talus slope almost blocked the gulch through which he was riding. He had started to jig his horse around the edge, when the animal exploded and tried to climb the sheer wall on the off-side.

July glanced up finally and saw a man come hurtling end over end down the talus. He bounded like a ball, first on his head, then on his feet, a clatter of dust and stone following him down the slope in a small avalanche. He whipped past July's spooked horse, struck the far wall with a bone-shattering thud, bounced back three feet again, and lay still.

As soon as he could quiet his horse, July dismounted, and queazily turned the battered man over.

His face was bashed to a pulp, and there was a bullet hole in the back of his head that slanted out through his right cheek, but July recognized him. It was Cy Perdotte, the man whose life he had threatened in sheer exasperation, bluff and big talk in the Saddle Bar in town.

The frown came back to July's face, because this unexplained incident seemed to be of a piece with the vague troubles that pestered him.

He climbed the talus slope and looked around, but there was nothing to see, nothing except Cy's horse, on a distant hill, high-tailing it for home. July spent an hour, looking for some sign that might show what had happened, but he finally gave it up, and slid back down.

"You're a damned troublesome character, Cy," he muttered, irritably, "but I'll see you git a decent burial all the same, just for Sonny's sake."

Then he loaded the battered corpse on his horse, and headed for home.

HAWK-EYED Jim Keats, B-Bar 13 foreman, must have seen him head for the barn, but he probably didn't notice the body. He was near the bunkhouse, talking with the drifter July had hired some time before. July stowed the body in the buckboard and joined them.

"This here feller wants to drift," Keats remarked, sourly. "I don't know why you hire them no-goods. They always want to drift when there's work to do."

The drifter's name was Abe Sire. He acted like a whipped dog, digging a hole in the dust with the toe of his boot.

"What's the trouble, Abe?" July inquired. "Don't we treat you right?"

"It's nothin' like that," Abe mumbled. "I'm just fiddle-footed."

July nodded understandingly, and reached into his pocket. "How much you got comin'?"

"Let it go," Abe answered. "I ain't been here long."

"It comes to twelve dollars," Keats growled.

July counted it out. The drifter tried to stop him before he got half through, but July went right on, and, at the end, peeled off one extra bill, a sweat-stained, torn thing that should have gone into the fire.

"Buy yourself a drink on me, Abe, when you ride up a thirst. Or if you see anybody in worse shape than you, give it to him. Good luck!"

Abe grinned his thanks, and rode off on his sorry nag. Keats scowled, and muttered something about throwing money around like a drunken sailor. July laughed.

"My name's Baker, Jim," he said. "Ever hear of a Baker's dozen?"

"I never hear nothin' else around here," Jim growled, "so you don't need to explain it means thirteen instead of twelve. Hell, July, just because yore name's Baker, you don't need to overdo everything."

"I like to give full measure, Jim. It's good business. It all comes back."

"If you ever see that dollar again, I'll eat it," Jim snorted, and stalked away.

"I'm goin' to town, Jim," July called after him. "If that Army buyer shows up, tell him I'll throw in one horse to boot for every dozen he buys."

He chuckled to himself, knowing Jim was too tight-fisted ever to mention such a thing, and moved back to the barn. He threw a tarp over the battered body, hitched up his driving team, and headed for town. It was a warm day in September. He liked the feel of the air, the hazy blur of the far distances, the faint prickle of dust in his nose.

At the half way fork in the road, he overtook a man afoot, and gave him a lift. The stranger said his name was Kit McEwen. He had hoofed it clear from Crocker, and his feet were on fire.

"I'm burnin' up at both ends," he stated, mopping his face. "I didn't think it 'ud git so warm."

"Damn silly remark to make," July said, "but I s'pose you lost yore horse."

"Horse an' cash an' gear," Kit McEwen confessed, frankly. "I got cleaned out by a tinhorn crook. I didn't have a dime till I met a drifter a spell back, an' he gave me a dollar." He got it out and showed it.

July's eyes twinkled suddenly. It was the same dollar he had given Abe Sire. "How about tradin' for a fresh one?" he asked. It sounded like another silly remark, but Kit didn't seem to consider it so, and said he would. They exchanged bills, and July put the frayed bill back in his pocket, grinning foolishly.

"What's the joke, mister?" Kit asked.

"Come out to the B-Bar 13 some time, an' see for yourself. There's a gent out there likes to eat these things."

Kit grinned, a little lop-sidedly, and said he might take July up, at that. "I'm lookin' for a ridin' job hereabouts."

"Come out any time," July invited. "We always got a job for a good man." He caught a glimpse of the gun at Kit's belt, and, looking off at the sky, added, "Seems as if a man would let his gun go before he lost his horse an' saddle."

"Some might," Kit stated, laconically. Then, for the first time, he glanced back, and caught sight of the corpse in the buckboard box.

"Holy Jupiter!" he exclaimed.

JULY looked back, and saw that the tarpaulin had slid off to one side, exposing an arm and leg. "A horse thief," he explained briefly.

"Looks as if he went through a meat-grinder. Steal some of your horses?"

"Not lately." July felt obliged to explain the circumstances. "I never saw the beat the way he came bouncin' down the talus. I'm takin' him to town for decent burial. He's got a boy I want to let down easy."

They rode on in silence for some time. A rider showed up on a far rim, and headed toward them. July watched with growing misgivings.

"Unless I'm mistaken," he stated at last, "that's him now."

July wasn't mistaken. Sonny Perdotte pulled up in a blur of dust, and stopped the buckboard team. He was a dark-haired, good-looking button of nineteen, and his temper was in full flame. He glared out of smouldering eyes at July.

"Where's my old man?" he demanded hotly.

July gave Kit a warning look, and shrugged. "How should I know, Sonny?"

"His horse came home, empty-saddled. You claimed you'd gut-shoot him on sight, July. Them two things fit together."

"Nothing to it, Sonny," July said carefully. "Just big talk. Besides, that was quite a while ago."

Sonny didn't look persuaded. "You shouldn't mess with him, July. You scared the wits clear out of him. He ain't stole a horse in a year."

"You'll probably find him somewhere," July said, and tried to drive on.

"Hold on," Sonny flared up. "I know he went to your place lookin' for our broncs."

"If he went to my place lookin' for your broncs, he went to the wrong place."

"Oh, no, he didn't. You got some up there beyond the hogback. I seen 'em. You blotched the brands, but they're ourn."

"That's a damned lie, Sonny," July flared up, "an' you know it."

"I seen em," Sonny insisted, "but I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want him to go off half-cocked." He came in closer and motioned to Kit. "Pull yore freight, mister."

Kit didn't move, and tried to talk Sonny out of it. "Hell, I just walked all the way from Crocker. You wouldn't set me afoot again, would you?"

"Git down an' hightail," Sonny roared, pulling his gun, and whipping it sideways.

Kit threw his legs over the wheel, and hit the ground. Sonny probably didn't intend to use his gun. He started to slide it back into the holster, and then suddenly saw the exposed arm and leg in the buckboard. He flicked the tarp aside with the gun barrel, stared blankly a moment, and then with a strangled oath, swung on July.

"You lyin' buzzard," he yelled. "I'll—"

"Put up that gun, Sonny!" July snapped. "Take a dally in yore temper, an' listen. I'll tell you—"

"Shut up!" Sonny snapped.

July tried to beat some sense into him with the sound of his voice, but it didn't work. Sonny's horse spooked a little in the midst of the uproar, but Sonny got off a shot, and the bullet clipped through the seat-back with a spatter of splinters and fuzz. The main reason he missed was because Kit had lunged in, and got him by the leg, and hauled him off his horse.

July's team bolted, and he got a ride over rough land that jarred him like a bucking bronc. One rein fouled in the harness, throwing the team in a wide circle. When he finally got it loose, and whip-sawed them to a stop, the team had almost made a complete circle, and were close to the spot where it had started from.

But Sonny was gone, and Kit was sprawled on the ground like a shot horse. July brought him to, though, with a little rough jogging.

"Come on, son," he prodded, "pull yourself together. He's gone. What happened?"

"Nothing," Kit answered, shaking his head, and working his joints to see if they were still in place. "Nothin' I'd care to remember."

CHAPTER TWO

Sign of the Bell and Ball

JULY stopped for a drink at the Saddle Bar after delivering the corpse to Tom Trowell, the sheriff, and telling him what had happened.

"It was bound to happen some time," Tom stated. "Where'd you shoot him?"

"In the head. Hell, I mean I didn't shoot

him. I didn't have a thing to do with it. I mean he got shot in the head."

"Hmmmm!" had been the sheriff's answer to that.

Thinking back, July realized he had probably made the wrong impression by mis-speaking and then trying to correct it. But it didn't matter a great deal. Cy's reputation had lost him the protection of the law. July tried to make a little small talk with the bartender, but Louie's heart wasn't in it, and July let him wipe his slops in peace.

He was glad to see Tracey Towne, who owned the big Turkey Claw on Milk Creek, come in. Between them, they had once shared Horseshoe Valley, but Stark Sabo, who kept a law office in town, had bought out some two-bit outfits along the fringes, and built them up into a big place he called the Bell and Ball. They were now the big three of the valley, and supplied Fort Wilkey with all the horses it needed.

Trace tried to avoid July, and had a drink at the far end of the bar all by himself. Two men July didn't know came in a little later and took a table along the wall. Trace glowered harder than ever when he saw them. July could tell he was half drunk already, and intent on making a thorough job of it. He began talking to his drink, and July edged toward him, meaning to get him out of the place on his own two feet, the way a man of his dignity ought to go. But Trace wouldn't budge.

"Git away from me," he mumbled sulkily. "Git away."

"Hell, I ain't got the plague anymore, Trace," July retorted. "I'm just lookin' f'r somebody to chew the fat."

"I ain't in a talkin' mood."

July got him started, though, and then got a lot more than he bargained for. Trace stated that the two men who had followed him into the bar were persecuting him. He said they were tough gun-hands, hired by Stark Sabo to keep him in line.

"In line with what?" July inquired, rolling his tongue in his cheek, discounting most of what Trace said.

"You'll find out."

"That's what I'm tryin' to do, Trace."

Trace thought a while, and then said, "I got a hunch to tell you the whole damned thing, July."

July nodded encouragingly, but when Trace finally got started, he couldn't tell whether it was sheer whiskey talk, or not. Half of it, he knew, was true. He had known it a long time, and it went back a long way. In his younger days, Trace had been a bronc-buster. He had a contract with the Army at so much a bronc, and he had made good at it, and married, and raised a son.

"At least," Trace said, "I know he got to be five years old."

THIS was in the Dakotas. One day mother and son hired a livery rig in town, and went for a ride. They never came back. Renegade Sioux had jumped them, and they never returned. That much July knew, but Trace was adding to it now.

"I blamed the troopers at the post for lettin' it happen so close to town. I soaked myself in booze like I'm doin' now, to git it out of my mind. One night in a saloon I braced an army sergeant about it, and we got into a hell of a fight. I didn't even know his name. It was just a deadfall brawl, but—I killed him. And after that I went clear out of my head f'r a spell.

"When I come to, two months later, I was way down in Kansas. I musta been travelin' all that time, but I ain't got any recollection of how I got down there."

He stopped, and pushed back from the bar, hands gripped on the edge, as if to gauge the size of his jag.

"What's the connection between that and Stark Sabo, or them two hombres back there?" July prodded him on.

"Sabo knows about that barroom killing, and he's usin' it to keep me in line. He's got it fixed, July, all up an' down the line, so the Army'll buy any damn thing on four legs."

"What the hell you talkin' about?" Even from Trace, this was more than July could understand, or stomach.

"I tell you he's got it fixed so all the specifications are thrown right overboard, without a squawk from anybody, except the troopers who gotta ride em."

"You mean he's bought up this buyer who's around here?"

"Him, an' everybody else."

"H'mmm. Where'd he git the money?"

Trace squirmed. "A hell of a lot of it from me. His Bell and Bar stock never did amount to much, but he's gettin' the same prices you get, July, for any half-broke bronc he kin git his hands on."

"What about you?"

Trace winced. "I can't help myself, July, with that killin' hangin' over me."

"It won't work, Trace, not unless I'm in on it, too." July tried to convince himself it was wild talk, but Trace, except for his drinking habits, was a shrewd and prudent man. July couldn't in a moment fix in his mind all the angles of such a scheme, and realize what it meant for him, but he knew he didn't want any part of it. And there was no way Sabo could push it down his throat.

The talk gave him an uneasy feeling all the same. He didn't like Sabo. He was devious and greedy. It was possible he hadn't

accurately measured the lengths to which Sabo would go to gain his ends. Or, possibly, even the ends Sabo had measured out for himself. He might not be content to share the valley. He might want it all for himself. A man as smart as Sabo wouldn't buck army specifications, or try to push culls down a Quartermaster's throat unless he meant to go whole hog, and win as much as he risked.

"The buyer's in town, July, but he ain't been near your place, has he?"

"No, he ain't," July admitted.

"He won't be, either. Sabo's bought him off, and my money's gone into it. I had to play along. At first I tried to think it was just good business, but I know now it's damned dirty business. I guess I knew it all the time, but I—I was a yaller, gutless fool."

July was still trying to sort out what was apt to be true in Trace's talk, and he didn't answer. Trace took another drink. He had steadied down some while he talked, but his voice was still thick and muddy, and he was probably worse off than even July realized, because, all at once, he let himself get completely out of hand.

"By God," he exploded, slamming his hand against his glass, and sending it crashing off the far end of the bar, "if Sabo came in that there door right now I'd kill the buzzard. I'd fill him full of lead."

"You ain't got a gun," July reminded him. "Come on, Trace, let's git outa here."

Trace didn't move. He glanced back at the table where the two men were sitting, as if he had momentarily forgotten them, then suddenly spun around, and with his back to the bar, called them every name he could think of. July tried to quiet him, but it wasn't any use.

Trace gave himself a push, and lurched across the room. July grabbed at him, but missed. Louie, the bartender, muttered something under his breath. Trace reached the table, and sent the two drinks and bottle crashing to the floor.

"Hold it, gents!" July yelled. "He's dead drunk. He—"

ONE man jumped away from the table, gun leveled. The other stayed in his chair, tipped back against the wall. For an instant, the steel blade of a throwing knife showed in his hand.

"Stow it, Utah," the other rasped.

Utah's hands came apart, and the steel blade had disappeared up his sleeve again.

"Anything you say, Brag," Utah answered with a lazy, sardonic drawl.

"Remember it after this," Brag retorted, sourly. Then he took a step forward, and slashed Trace across the face from ear to nose with his gun barrel. Trace's head whipped sideways, and when he pulled it back he got the gun the same way on the other side.

July let out a roar of rage and dived in. He got his shoulder under the table and slammed the whole thing, full force, against Utah's head, battering him against the wall until he went limp and dropped to the floor.

Trace was taking an awful beating. For some reason, Brag didn't shoot, not until July rushed him with the table. Then he fired point-blank. Bullets splintered the wood, and numbed July's arm, clear up to his shoulder. But he was too roaring mad to let anything stop him.

He ripped off a table leg, flung the rest of the table at Brag with one hand, and while he was dodging, smashed the solid oak leg across the man's skull. It staggered the gunman, but he didn't go down.

Trace groped blindly through a blood-blurred fog, muttering groggily to himself.

July pushed Brad away, and got in another blow, this time in the ribs under his up-raised arm, and the wind went out of him like a punctured drum. His knees buckled, and while he was going down, July flung the stick at him for good measure. It caught Brag across the neck, spun free, and crashed through the window. It took some of the blistering rage out of July's system, and brought him to his senses a little.

When he finally turned to Louie, who was watching, horror-struck, behind the bar, there was a wry grin on his face.

"Sweep 'em out an' tally up the damage, Louis," he told the barkeep. "I'll stand the bill. Come on, Trace."

Trace couldn't move, though. So July picked him up, and carried him to Doc Wister's office.

"I'll be along in a half hour to get him," he said. "Sober him up, too, if you can."

"Sober him up, hell!" Doc muttered. "I'll be lucky if I git him all back in one piece."

July went on to Sabo's office over the Territorial Bank. Sabo's law business had put its stamp on him. He looked as if he lived on parchment paper. And, in a manner of speaking, he had. He scavenged for faulty land titles, and black-mailed the owners to sell their equities for a song. July's wrath boiled up again, and he didn't waste any time on preliminaries.

"You're due for a good whuppin', Sabo. Them two jaspers you got, Utah an' Brag, tried to gun-whip Trace Towne. I sided him, an' cleaned up on both of them. I'm here to show you how it went—with gestures."

Sabo had narrow black eyes, and a twitch in one cheek that flicked like a dagger when he was excited.

"I wouldn't care to know how it went, July," he retorted, warily. "If my boys get into trouble in a bar, it's their own fault.

Towne's been runnin' off at the mouth altogether too much."

"Mebbe so, but I'm tellin' you right here and now, Sabo, don't bother me, or I'll make you wish you'd never set eyes on Horseshoe Valley."

Sabo jumped up. "You'll sing a different tune when I'm through with you," he snapped back, baring his teeth. "Now git out."

Some cautious instinct in the back of his mind warned July to be careful, but he pushed it aside. "Yore hired hands didn't do their job, Sabo. I'm here to let you take a try at it yoreself."

Sabo spun, and clawed for a gun that was buried under some papers on his desk. July slapped him down in his chair before he could reach it, and gave it a shove that tipped it backward, and sent Sabo sprawling belly-flat on the floor.

"Git up," July roared. "Git up, you crawlin' snake, an' defend yoreself."

Sabo lunged for the window, and probably would have thrown himself out if July had let him. But he caught him by the collar and jerked him back and sent him hurtling against the far wall.

"Stand up and defend yoreself!" he roared again.

Chalk-white with reckless rage, Sabo made a rush, slobbering profanity and vicious hate. His eyes glazed with fury, his lips drew back in a wolfish snarl. He let go with both fists, but his aim was way off. July dodged down, then drove up with his fist and caught Sabo in the throat with a staggering, strangling blow that lifted him off the floor and threw him in a limp heap in the corner.

Some time later, when July was back at Doc Wister's, loading Trace into the buckboard, he told Doc he ought to go over to Sabo's office some time before evening, either as a medico or a coroner.

"Don't hurry," he said. "Any time will do. Come to think of it, it'd suit me better if you didn't go a-tall."

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Men—Wholesale!

KIT McEWEN rode out to the B-Bar 13 place in the midday sun, on a livery stable nag. He came at it in a roundabout way, throwing a wide loop so he could keep an eye on another rider who was heading the same way. The other rider turned out to be Sonny Perdotte, probably checking over the ground where Cy had met his death. As soon as Sonny got over the hogback, Kit turned back. He saw another pair of horsemen going in the same direction, but he avoided them, and kept on to the ranchhouse.

Several miles short of the place, another rider approached, and he pulled up out of sight to watch.

It turned out to be a girl, and she was a pretty sight to see, with her blonde hair flying in the wind, and her horse traveling like all get out, but Kit couldn't figure out what she was up to. She had a six-shooter in her hand, and every little while she would throw down on something, and, with a shrill yell, let fly.

Kit finally rode out and stopped her. He was glad to discover that she was prettier than ever at close range. "What on earth you up to?" he inquired.

She flushed beet-red and squirmed with confusion. "N-nothing!" She shoved the smoking weapon in its holster, and winced when the hot barrel touched her leg. Then she laughed suddenly, and added, "I'm playing Wild West."

"What?"

"I'm Granny Baker at the massacre of Little Indian Creek."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"I expect so."

"You aren't out of your mind?"

"No-o-o. But I would be if I didn't do something like this once in a while. I've got to let off steam. Otherwise I'd start tearing my hair out by the roots."

"That," Kit told her solemnly, "would be a mortal sin." She looked to him like a girl who had no idea how beautiful she was. "I think," Kit told himself, just as solemnly, "I'm goin' to tell her right to her face . . . some time."

She told him her name was Laura. She was eighteen.

Kit grinned and said, "Mine's Kit. I'm twenty. I'm goin' to work out here."

"Who said so?"

"Your pop."

"Hmmm. He doesn't always have the last say."

"No? Who does?"

"Jim Keats. He's the foreman."

"I'll tackle him."

"He—he hates drifters."

"I might settle down."

"I've heard that tale before."

When they reached the ranch yard, Laura off-saddled her horse and went to the house, and Kit went to brace Keats for a job. When he stated his business, Keats told him point-blank they didn't hire drifters under any consideration.

"I just got over it," Kit said.

"Go on, travel." Keats turned away, then suddenly halted again. Kit saw him wink at a puncher near the fence. "Kin you ride?"

Kit said he made a stab at it.

"You think you kin ride that there critter?"

Keats pointed at a stringy white bronc in the big corral.

"I kin make a stab at it," Kit said, modestly. "In fact, I'd like to give it a try. It'll give me a good chance to show off to my girl."

"Your girl?"

"Yeah," Kit said. "She'll be watchin' from the kitchen window—I hope."

HE RODE the bronc, too, through some of the wildest bucking it had ever been his misfortune to endure. Rode him to a standstill, until all the bronc could give him was a mean and winded look. At least, that was what Kit thought. Even Keats was giving him a grudging nod. Then the critter suddenly exploded again and sent him sailing clear over the fence, where he landed on his head with a jolt that knocked all the guts out of him.

July Baker saw it from the barn. He was unhitching the team, and trying to make up his mind whether to wake Trace up and get him to the house, or let him sleep it off in the buckboard, when he saw Kit going over the fence. By the time he reached the corral Kit was beginning to come to. July told him it was the nicest ride he had ever seen made on Whitey.

"An' that includes yore sorry performances, Jim," he added, sourly.

"I don't claim I kin ride him," Jim growled. "You hadn't better."

Kit pushed up and got to his feet. He drew July aside, and told him what he had seen out on the range. "I figure Sonny's gone out there to take another look at your horses. If he sees any of his own, he'll probably raise hell with the whole band."

July nodded. "He probably will. You think you kin stand a jog out there?"

"Sure. I'll show you where I saw him."

This time July took his shooting iron. They rode a long ways, skirting Half-Mile Creek, then up and over the hogback into rough country. Kit led the way, skirting the ledge of the wash into which he had seen Sonny disappear. When they finally caught up with him, Sonny was only a mile or two short of the narrow slot into Spring Canyon. He wasn't alone now.

The two men Kit had seen heading in the same direction had joined him. Kit and July pulled up behind some rocks on the high ledge, and watched. For some time, they couldn't make out what was going on. Finally, July let out an oath.

"My God, Kit, they—they're fixin' to hang that boy!"

That was what it looked like. Sonny had his hands tied behind him, and the three of them were heading for a nearby clump of trees. July and Kit moved, hunting a place to get down the ledge. When they got another look, the two men had gotten a rope over a dead branch, and had spooked Sonny's horse out from under him.

"You git down there an' see what you kin do," July ordered. "I'll try to head those two hombres off."

Kit went straight down the slope. July headed along the ledge, gradually zig-zagging off the rimrock. He reached the floor of the wash in time to block the flight of the two riders. The moment they saw him they opened fire. July fired back, and the near rider went down in a headlong dive. As far as July could see, he never did get one foot out of the stirrup. The horse bolted out of sight, and if the man wasn't dead when he hit the ground, he was when he finished that trip.

The other's horse stumbled, throwing the rider. He took cover along the far wall, and opened fire. July swung back behind some rocks and dismounted. Bullets spattered against the overhang. Once, a shard scaled off, and struck him a glancing blow. An inch closer, and it would have cut him open from head to foot. Kit signaled, farther down the wash, and finally showed up on foot, working his way along the far wall. The killer shifted his position. Kit kept hazing him along, working in closer and closer, and taking a shot whenever he got a chance. It wouldn't be long before the killer had to break out into the open. But he had one trick left, and it almost cost Kit his life.

For a moment, Kit lost sight of him, and when he showed up again, he had climbed straight up the heap of rocks behind which he was hiding, and had Kit dead to rights. July couldn't see him either, until he showed up on his high perch.

July yelled a warning to Kit, and ran out to draw fire, but it didn't work. The man didn't turn. He didn't intend to until he had finished Kit off. July stopped in his tracks, and took aim. He had to make it count, but he couldn't take as much time as he wanted. He squeezed the trigger, and his gun roared.

For a second, nothing happened. The man didn't move. His gun didn't waver. But it lasted only a split second. Then his knees buckled, and his gun clattered out of his hand, and he plunged headlong from his high perch to the canyon floor below.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brands—Blotched!

JULY got more than one wry chuckle out of his day on the warpath. "Regular damned Dead-eye Dick, Laura," he told his daughter. "I cleaned up on everybody."

Laura brought him down to the ground

with a sobering question. "What does all this trouble add up to? What's going on?"

July frowned. "I don't exactly know. It's hard to tell whether things just happen, or somebody's prodding 'em along."

"Stark Sabo, for instance?"

July pursed his lips, and nodded. "It could be."

"I talked with Trace," Laura said. "He told me what kind of a tight he was in. He told me the whole story."

"But Sabo ain't got any way of gettin' the whip-hand over me. I never killed anybody in a deadfall brawl."

"What about Cy Perdotte? Who killed him?"

"I don't know. I didn't."

"It could be made to look like you did."

"Hell, Sabo wouldn't try to pin that on me. It wouldn't be worth while. Nobody'll ever hang for killin' Cy Perdotte. He needed killin'."

"What about Sonny?"

July agreed that might be different. "Most folks like Sonny, an' they wouldn't go so easy on the man who hung him."

"Especially not if some of his broncs are mixed in with our stuff."

"But they ain't. Hell, I—"

"I went out and looked," Laura said. "They're there, all right, and the brands are blotched. Somebody changed their P Bar 1 to our B-Bar 13."

"Damnation!" July exploded.

The thing was shaping up like a trap, and he was ready to admit it at last. He was vulnerable now, if a man meant to hound him down, tooth and nail.

"Come to think of it," he grimaced sourly, "I'm half-ruined already, an' I ain't even sure who's doin' it. I know who's doin' it, but not to put the finger on him. I got to git that damned Sabo out in the open."

"Is—Kit on the square?"

"Yeah," July answered promptly.

"Is Sonny Perdotte dead or alive?"

"I ain't talkin'. Kit an' I agreed that we'd—"

"Who cut him down?"

"I didn't see a thing. I was busy with that other jasper."

Jim Keats joined them, and said he had sent Kit to town to return the livery stable nag.

"I give him some cash, too, so he could pay for it," he grumbled. "Keep it offn his next pay."

"Anything you say, Jim," July agreed blandly.

KEATS felt in his pocket and came out with a small article he said he had picked up off the ground after Kit had had his spree with the bronc, Whitey. It was a small silver medallion, with the initials K. T. etched on the back.

"I picked it up where he landed," Keats remarked, "but I don't s'pose it could be hisn. K. T. ain't his initials."

"In other words, you think it is hisn, and you don't believe his name's Kit McEwen."

"Yeah, I do, if you want to put it that way," Keats retorted, and stalked away again.

"Damndest crank I ever saw f'r ridin' a drifter," July muttered irritably. His humor improved, though, when he saw Kit coming up the road from Roaring Rain, and even Kit's news—that he was just beating the sheriff's deputy in by a hair—didn't spoil it again.

"You mean that fathead, Ike Walters?" July inquired.

"Yeah—fat an' chubby."

"What'd you do?"

"Me? Nothin'. It's you he's after."

"What'd I do?"

"Seems as if you hung somebody," Kit replied.

Breathless and red-faced, Ike blew in. He said the sheriff wanted to have a talk with July.

"I guess you know why," he stated, with a sulky look at Kit. "He rode hell a-kitin' so he could tell you."

"He never did. What's Tom want?"

"He wants to see you about a certain ropin' party."

"What ropin' party?"

"Sonny Perdotte's."

"So he's been hung at last, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Who told you?"

"Well, he ain't home. He ain't in town anywhere."

"That's a helluva reason."

"You gotta come with me, July. Tom thinks you done it, an' then cut him down."

"Why would I hang him, an' then cut him down?"

"I don't know. I don't know nothin' about it."

"Where's your corpus delicti, Ike?"

"I don't know. What's that?"

July looked exasperated. "Great Balls of Fire, Ike, you mean to say you've been lawin' two years now, an' don't know what a corpus delicti is. I wish you'd begin to learn somethin', or give the whole thing up."

He put on a big show of irritation, but the shadowy menace that hung over him was finally beginning to take substance, and he really welcomed it, so he could get to the man behind it all, and fight back at last.

"I hadn't ought to," he muttered, "it's just an accommodation."

"I don't care what it is, just so you come peaceable."

Neither of them said much on the way back, but when they got to Roaring Rain, July had a long argument with the sheriff. Tom Trowell frankly admitted he didn't have much to go on, but it was enough to throw July in jail on suspicion of murder, and he had to do his duty.

"You had a hot argument with him yesterday, on the way to town. You killed his old man, and—"

"I did not."

"Who did?"

"I don't know. That's your business to find out."

"It's Sonny I'm thinkin' about. Folks like him. He'd be all right if he had half a chance. I thought you'd be the first to give him one, now that his old man's out of the way."

"Who told you he was hung?"

"A man saw it done, July," the sheriff said gravely.

July seemed impressed at last. "Uh—mebbe I ought to git a lawyer, eh, Tom?"

"You'll need one."

"But I don't know who I could git—after that whuppin' I give Sabo."

"I'd be willing to talk to him," Tom offered.

"Hell, he'd sell me out," July muttered.

"Not after he took yore case, July. He couldn't do that. It ain't legal."

"Well," July agreed sulkily, "you git hold of him, an' see what you kin do."

He knew he was playing with fire, but Sabo might come in, if only to try to find out what actually happened to Sonny Perdotte. And July wanted him in so he could prod him into thinking he could safely show his hand, and make a final reckless move to ruin July. Then the real fight would begin, and it would be a fight to the finish.

TROWELL led July to his cell, and locked him in. It was small, but clean and comfortable. Straight across the narrow hallway was another cell of the same size.

"I hope I'm not crowdin' you, if that place across there's the only one you got left," July remarked wryly.

"Not at all," Trowell answered. "All we need the other place for is a drunk now an' then."

Sabo, still black and blue from the beating he had gotten, showed up later in the day. After talking with the sheriff a while, he came to July's cell, and looked in.

"I've told Trowell I'll do what I can for you," he stated, coldly.

"Any strings attached?" July asked.

"None!" Sabo snapped. "Only I want the facts."

"Sure," July said carelessly.

"It'll be nip-and-tuck for you, July, and whichever way it goes will be up to you. First of all, I want to know if Sonny's really dead or not."

"Naturally," July agreed.

"Well?"

"Why not let Tom worry about that for a while. He's got to have a corpse, and I want to claim there ain't no such animal."

"Under the circumstances, that'd be ridiculous," Sabo prodded him along.

"Would it?" July said, with a wise look.

"What do you mean?"

"Mebbe he ain't dead. He might've high-tailed it somewhere."

July knew this was what was worrying Sabo. If he found out the case against July wouldn't stand up, he would be sure to try another scheme to ruin July. And that was what July was aiming at, something to get Sabo into the open for a showdown.

"We might as well have it right now," he told himself. "It'd be a load offn my shoulders, though, if I got that Army voucher in my hands first. Then he can't touch me there, at any rate. The trouble is, the old buzzard kin think up more schemes in a minute than I kin unsnarl in a year. . . ."

Aloud, he said, "I'll pay you well for gettin' me outa this, Sabo."

"I can promise you that," Sabo agreed, sardonically.

"I'm short of cash, though, an' if you see that Army buyer around I wish you'd send him in. I'd like to talk business. Then you kin have some cash."

"I'll see him," Sabo promised, and then went after July again, trying to find out, behind all his cagey questions, just what had happened to Sonny Perdotte. But July kept out of every trap, and Sabo finally left.

"I didn't lie more'n once or twice through the whole thing," July congratulated himself. "But now I wonder what kind of a buzzard's brew he'll cook up for me."

Probably, he shouldn't have mentioned his anxiety about the buyer. If Sabo had him bought up, as Trace Towne claimed, the buyer wouldn't be likely to show up. On the other hand, if Sabo saw a chance to make a big chunk of money out of July, he might play it different.

"But I'll have to watch myself from every angle until something breaks and I kin pin him down cold to one of his crooked plays."

CHAPTER FIVE

Jailhouse Jamboree

WITH all this gnawing at him, he began to figure he had made a mistake letting himself be thrown into jail. But, toward supper time, the new buyer actually showed up.

His name was Cas Pruitt. He was sandy-haired, and had a faint shimmer of red whiskers over his face. He had probably soldiered some himself, at least he had what looked like a saber scar reaching vividly from under his sleeve across the top of his hand. He said Hoyt Munger, with whom July had always done business, had died of the plague.

"I s'pose Sabo sent you," July remarked.

"No, Jim Keats sent me," Pruitt answered. "I just came from your place. I ain't seen Sabo today."

"Oh, I see."

"The way I see it, Baker," Pruitt continued, "you and I kin do some real business. I talked it over with Keats, and he told me to come here, and let you know what the deal is."

"How many horses you need?"

"I want to take everything you got. Keats says you can deliver four hundred, all right up to specifications, and I'll take every one of them. I know B-Bar 13 stock, and that's all I need to know."

"When you want 'em?"

"Right off. Keats is goin' to start gettin' them together, pronto. He told me they'd be ready to shove off to Fort Wilkey day after tomorrow, and I'm bankin' on it."

"If Keats says so, they'll be ready," July agreed. "How you goin' to drive 'em?"

"I got a crew at Crocker. They're troopers, but they know how to haze stock, and I'll have your voucher for you when I take possession."

"That," July said, with a long inward sigh of relief, "suits me fine."

Ike Walters, the deputy, came in with his supper, and the buyer left. July ate his meal with considerable relish, now that one worry was off his mind. If Pruitt hadn't seen Sabo, and had gone out to the B-Bar 13 of his own accord, then what Trace Towne had said about him wasn't true. But he still had to guard against treachery, and it could come from any direction. Finally, he took a snooze, and it was long past dark when he woke up again.

Ike was shoving a noisy drunk into the cell across the hall. Except for the light from the front office, the cells were dark, and July couldn't see very well what was going on. When Ike was finished with his chore, he stood back a moment, and mopped his forehead.

"Tough customer?" July inquired, moving toward the cell door.

"Tough as they come," Ike claimed. "But I got his gun offn him."

"Good work, Ike. You keep at it a couple more years, an' you'll git the hang of it. Either that, or you'll be a dead duck. Who is he?"

"I dunno. Utah something-or-other. I think he works out to Sabo's Beller an' Bawl place. Ornery damned jasper."

"Never heard of him," July answered, louder than necessary so Utah would be sure to hear.

"He better watch his step around here," Ike stated, tucking his thumbs in his vest. "Yes-siree." Then he went out to the front office, and put his big feet up on the roll top desk, pulled his hat over his nose, and went to sleep.

July went back to his bunk, from where he watched the cell across the hall a long time. Utah never stirred. July couldn't tell whether he was putting on an act, or whether he was actually in a drunken stupor. Not that it mattered much. Ike had disarmed him, and he couldn't do anyone any harm. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright, remembering the steel blade he had seen up the man's sleeve the day Trace had gone berserk. Holy Jupiter, July thought, that's Sabo's move. It's a put-up job.

Probably no one in the valley knew Utah was handy with a knife. For his own protection, Ike would claim he had disarmed him.

"And that leaves everybody in the clear," July told himself. "Likewise, it leaves me with a knife in my back, totally unaccounted for."

It was only a hunch, but July played it through. He didn't sleep much during the night, but he stayed where he was, regardless, until the morning sun came in. Then he pushed up from the floor, and crawled out from under his bunk where he had spent the night concealed by the blanket he had draped over the edge of the bunk.

Utah seemed to be sleeping off his jag. Ike was still in the front office, as if he hadn't budged the whole night long. Nothing had changed. July's boots were still in the bunk where he had put them, bolstered up to look like the figure of a man stretched full-length on the bunk, with the blanket draped over them to make it look more real. Nothing had changed, except that one of the boots had a knife, hilt-deep, in the tough leather.

JULY took his time about bringing the thing to a head. Utah finally looked up, and when he saw July his eyes popped, and his jaw went slack.

"Fooled yuh, didn't I?" July drawled. "You owe me a pair of good, bench-made boots, or you want me to take it outa yore hide?"

"I s'pose you think you're a purty smart old geezer?" Utah snapped back.

"Not at all," July answered, modestly. "I only do what I'm told."

"Who told you to do what?"

"I see no reason f'r tellin' you, my friend."

Utah rushed at the cage door. "Who told yuh?"

"Told me what?"

"That you were goin' to git a knife in yore gizzard."

July turned his back. "Why don't you git next to yoreself, mister. If Sabo told me to sleep under my bunk to keep a knife out of my hide, and told you to git yourself thrown in jail so you could put one into it, it adds up to something you ought to be able to figure out. Somebody's gettin' a whizzer pulled on him, and it ain't me. I still got a whole skin."

It was a tricky game July was playing, building up Utah's anger and suspicion on hunches and half-truths, but the logic of his argument seemed to sink in. And July didn't make the mistake of pushing it too hard. Utah smouldered and fumed, and finally demanded point-blank to know what that damned sneak was up to.

"You'll find out soon enough. It'll turn yore stomach, mister, when you do."

"If that side-winder double-crossed me, I'll—"

"About all you'll do is yell yore head off," July scoffed. "Hell, that's why he tricked you into this place before he showed his hand. He pulled all your fangs first. You see, I'm payin' Sabo good money to git me outa this fix. A handy way for him to do it is to pin Sonny Perdotte's hangin' onto somebody else. Looks like you got elected."

"I never seen such a double-crossin' snake in all my life," Utah snarled.

"Live and learn."

"You'll find out who's gettin crossed up," Utah finally blustered.

July figured he was trying to fight off his growing suspicions, and let it stand like that for the time being.

Jim Keats came in at noon, and said they were making the gather. "We're holding the whole bunch in Spring Canyon til mornin'. There's good grass in there, and lots of water. We won't have any trouble."

"That's a small place to hold four hundred horses," July objected.

"I'll admit they're crowded," Jim answered, "but they'll make out. The grass is hock-high, and they don't need to move around much."

"Mebbe you're right."

"I sure was surprised to see that buyer show up yesterday."

Utah was listening with both ears, and July tried to put a clincher on the talk he had had with him earlier in the morning. "Sabo and Cas Pruitt came in here yesterday," he remarked, casually. "We made a deal."

"I figured it was somethin' like that," Jim chimed in.

July didn't want the talk to go any further right then, and the sorry-looking spectacle Keats made gave him a good excuse for changing the subject.

"What'd you do, Jim," he inquired, "kick yoreself in the face?"

Jim grabbed his eye. "Holy Fright! I didn't know it was showin'."

"What'd you do, run into a horse-hoof?"

"That damned drifter!" Jim sputtered.

"Who you mean?"

"That last one you hired—Kit McEwen. I kicked him offn the place, July."

"And kicked yoreself in the eye while you were at it I s'pose."

"That loafer said he was pullin' out the minute he heard there was work to do gatherin' that bunch of horses. I told him he wasn't, and tried to yank him offn his horse, and he kicked me in the eye. When I come to, he was gone. He's the last drifter you'll hire, July, or I'm quittin'."

"Sure, sure."

"When you goin' to git outa here?"

"Sssh," July said, impressively. "As I said, it's all fixed, but this ain't no time to talk about it." He bent his head sideways a little, indicating Utah. "There's long ears around here. I'll tell you later." He kept his voice down, but he knew it would carry across the hallway. "Sabo wants to keep it quiet." Then he raised his voice again, "By the way, did you pay Kit off?"

CHAPTER SIX

Fire!

JIM cussed, and stalked out. Utah grumbled and fumed for some time. "You'd do the same thing if you was in my boots, mister," July told him. "I don't need to look out for you. After all, you did try to knfe me, an' if you draw a hangnoose it ain't any more'n you got comin'."

"Look," Utah said finally, "if I had another knife, I'd cut yore throat where you stand, but can't you see that stinker, Sabo, is double-crossin the both of us."

"Money talks," July stated, smugly. "When I git my old paws on that there Army voucher—"

"You'll never see that army voucher, man. By mornin' you won't have no horses left to sell that damned buyer."

"Go ahead," July taunted, "shoot off yore mouth all you please. It don't bother me."

"Sabo knew you'd hold all them horses in that rock corral. He's aimin' to have Brag an' some of the boys drop a torch down in from the rimrock. He don't give a damn f'r yore horses, nor yore money. He wants yore place."

The words suddenly throttled July, like a hand around his neck. It was what he had been trying to prod out of Utah all morning, so he could get Sabo out in the open, and fight him. But when the truth came, it struck like a bolt of lightning.

With grass hock-high, and matted thick

from other years, the smoulder would strangle every last salable horse he owned. A scheme like that would ruin him. As usual, Sabo had been thinking and scheming far ahead of him. He had played into the shyster's hands, after all, instead of the other way around.

He asked the sheriff to chase up Sabo on the pretext that he wanted to see him on his own case. But Tom came back a half hour later with the news that Sabo had gone to Crocker for the day.

"What's eatin' you, anyway?" the lawman asked.

"I gotta git outa here, Tom. I gotta git out right away."

"Dammit all, July, settle down. You got a killin' to answer for."

"I didn't kill anybody—yet."

"Prove it, an' I'll let you go."

"I'll prove it tomorrow. You let me go today."

"Prove it today, an' I'll let you go tomorrow when Sabo gits back."

"You can't do that to me, Tom."

"The hell I can't."

July couldn't get anywhere trying to change the sheriff's mind, but he didn't change his own, either, about getting out. When Ike came on duty at supper time, he was ready. Utah got his meal first. Ike didn't open the gate. He slid the dishes under through, and told Utah he'd have to pay for any he broke. Utah said he'd be damned if he would.

"You won't git nothin' more to eat if yuh don't," Ike told him. "Here's yore's, July. Katie made a stew, but she says it didn't turn out so good. It don't smell right."

"I'll say it don't."

Ike bent down to give the dish a push. July pulled out his knife, and gave the deputy a hard prod. "Don't move, Ike," he warned. "It's a knife. Now take it easy."

"Godamighty, July—"

"Open up, Ike, and step inside." July got hold of the deputy's gun, and felt better. "Give me the key."

Ike obeyed. July walked out, and locked Ike in. "There won't be any skin offn your nose, Ike, when we git this whole thing cleared up," July consoled him. "Just keep yore shirt on."

"I'll shoot yore ears off next time I set eyes on you, July," Ike blatted.

It was already dark outside. July found one of Tracey Towne's Turkey Claw horses at the tie-rail in front of the Saddle Bar, and took it. It was a good, fast animal, and July hammered through the dark with desperate goading fears yapping at his heels. If Utah was telling the truth, he had reason to hurry. He had to get him along the rimrock around Spring Canyon to protect his stock. It didn't seem likely they could hold it, there was too much ground to cover, but he meant to try. He could send three or four mounted men into the rock corral to stamp out any fires that started. It began to look more and more hopeless, though. The place was a death trap, and Sabo and Cas Pruitt knew it. With twenty or thirty gun hands to count on, they could call the tune. They probably had figured out every move July would make, and meant to put him in a tight he never would get out of.

HE FOUND six men in the bunkhouse, and routed them out. Jim Keats was at Spring Canyon with the rest of the crew. "Anything wrong, boss?" Larry Cross inquired.

"We're goin' to git burned out, boys," July told them. "Jim ain't expectin' it. Sabo's got his Beller & Bawl gunslicks on the warpath."

Spring Canyon was beyond the hogback where Kit and July had found Sonny Perdotte getting hung to a tree. A waning sickle moon stood in the sky, dead ahead, when they rode up the slot. The contours of the towering rimrock that edged the grassy canyon began to take form. July let out a long sigh of relief. But he had hardly gotten it off his chest when plumes of fire from three different points against the sky arched over the rim of the box canyon and dropped down.

Jim Keats had done all he could, sending three men into the canyon to stamp out the fires while the others climbed the rimrock to try to keep Sabo's black buzzards away from the edge.

"How many men you figure they got?" July asked.

"There must be thirty, from what I saw. We better open up, and drive the whole bunch out."

Gunfire broke out up above, and a moment later Hoot Regal showed up with a bullet through his shoulder.

"They got the slot covered," he reported. "Cobb got shot right out of his saddle. I don't think Bob got in either, but I don't know."

"That means they ain't goin' to let us drive any horses out," July concluded. "Come on, boys!"

They climbed the talus to the rimrock on foot. A simmer of smoke was coming up out of the canyon. Another torch flared near-by. July fired, and heard a shrill yell, and the flare died in a red puddle on the rocks.

"Spread out, boys, and cover all the territory you kin."

Another torch flared on the far side of the canyon, and swung down. The thud of spooked animals lifted out of the pit. Crouching low, July ran out along the rimrock. The crew spread out, making a thin line. A horseman hammered past, and July fired again. For a second he thought it was Sabo, but he changed his mind before the man toppled down.

Firing went on all along the line, and July realized how thin and futile it was. Even one man, more or less, wouldn't make much difference, but he found himself wishing Kit had stayed. He seemed to have the know-how in a tight. But a man could walk away from a fight that wasn't his own, and no one could blame him.

The moon was waning. Sabo's gun hands could wait it out, and when deep dark settled down, July and his crew wouldn't have a chance of holding them back. He cussed under his breath. The waiting, and the gloomy conviction that there could be only one end to this filled his with reckless anger.

"The damned snakes gotta be drove outa their holes, Jim. Let's you and me close in, and—"

"Afoot?"

July cussed, and shook his head. "Keep an eye out for Sabo, and that damned buyer. They're the ones I'm lookin' for."

"The way this place sets, with more rimrock further back, a sizable bunch of men could take them buzzards from both ends, and roll 'em all into a trap at the far end."

"We ain't got a sizable bunch of men."

"Damn that drifter f'r pullin' out just when—"

"Oh, shut up!"

"I don't see no fire down there. They ain't got the guts to close in."

"I don't know but what—"

Whatever he was going to say jumped back in his throat. The hammer of hoofs on hard rimrock lashed toward them. Grass torches on sticks lit up all along the rim, and converged toward the edge. July got to his feet. Three men rode at him. One carried the flare. July recognized him. It was Brag Torrent, the man who had gun-whipped Trace Towne in the Saddle Bar the day July had fetched Cy Perdotte's body to town, and made up his mind to a showdown, one way or another.

THIS was the showdown, and he was going to get a stomach full of lead out of it, and nothing more, because he was short-handed, and afoot, and wasn't hard-headed enough to fight a drifter, like Sabo had been before he got a foothold. He couldn't change the thing, but he could trade lead until he went down.

His gun roared, but he missed the first shot, and the second, and the third, probably because of the uncertain light. He sprawled flat, and waited out the burst of fire he drew on himself. The flares moved closer all around the rim. Jim Keats got a slug in his shoulder, and went down, cussing wrathfully. Gunfire built up all along the line. A flare went over the edge on the far side.

"Hell," July thought, "we'd need a regiment to pull the fat out of the fire this time."

He didn't get a regiment, but he got troops. Just when he expected the very worst, he got the best. They came in from both sides, just the way Jim Keats had figured out it ought to be done, and rolled Sabo's gun hands up from the flank like storm-tossed tumbleweeds. It was a total rout, and when it was over, they had them trapped against the sheer rocks under the leveled carbines of steady, seasoned troopers.

Brag Torrent was the only one who tried to shoot his way out. His horse lit out with a wild squeal, crashing through a jumbled mass of churning riders and discarded flares. His gun spurted flame, and for a second he had half a chance of making it. Then he went down in a headlong dive that stretched him flat on the ground with a broken neck. July got there just in time to see it happen. And when he saw the man who had brought him down, his eyes bugged out in sheer surprise. It was Kit McEwen.

"I had a hunch what was going to happen," Kit explained later. "That's why I pulled out, and treated Keats so rough. These troopers were waiting for me at Crocker."

"You're in the Army, eh?"

Kit nodded. "The Army had wind of what was going on here between Sabo and Cas Pruitt, and sent me down to take a hand because I was fresh out of the Academy, and nobody knew me. I made out I was a drifter so nobody'd find out what I was up to. Seems as if we got back just in time to save your horses. But it looks like Sabo and Cas Pruitt gave us the slip."

July looked over the sorry bunch of gunhands, and began to frown. He didn't want to belittle the help Kit had given him, but he knew his troubles would never be over until he met Stark Sabo in a shoot-out. So he couldn't quite keep the gloom out of his voice when he said, "Seems as if they did."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hell Brands a Bullet

SONNY PERDOTTE was heading for the B-Bar 13 ranchhouse when he heard the sound of gunfire, and turned back. He met troopers and B-Bar 13 boys herding Sabo's gun-hands over the hogback. July didn't give him much of a welcome.

"I thought I told you to hole up there at the line shack, an' stay there till I give you the word," July muttered irritably.

"You did, but—"

"What's wrong?"

"Sabo and that Army buyer showed up, July. They've been up there all day."

"Balls of Fire! Why didn't you come an' tell me."

"That's what I'm doin' now. I couldn't git away before. I went out the busted window when they come in the door, an' I had to lay right along that damned shack till dark right in a mess of ants. My horse was hid out away from the place, so they had no idea I was around. I got an earful of everything, July. Pete Wiley, Sabo's segundo, killed my pop, and throwed him down the slope at you. I'm goin' to find him, an'—"

"Are they still there?"

Sonny nodded. "I was hopin' to kill 'em off, but I didn't want to botch it, like I did with you the other day on the road. I heerd every damned thing they said. They blotched our brand, and throwed our horses in with yours, knowin' I was a hothead, an' would take steps. It was all a scheme to ruin you, July. They was still there when I pulled out, if you want to go back. Pete Wiley kin wait."

July pulled off to one side, and Sonny followed. They rode in silence for some time, coming at the shack from the south. Another rider, hammering in from the other direction, beat them to it, though.

"Looks like he's in a hell of a sweat," July muttered.

"That's Pete Wiley. He rides a paint."

Wiley ran for the shack. July and Sonny closed in. Before they reached the door, the three men came out, Cas Pruitt in the lead. "If there's troopers around I'll land in the pen," he was bellowing. "You messed this whole thing up, Sabo."

"You won't land in the pen, you yellow-bellied buzzard. You'll hang!"

"N-n-n-not me. I'll bust this thing wide open. I won't hang."

"All right, then, you won't," Sabo snarled, and drew his gun, and shot him in the back. Pruitt pitched forward on his face.

July bellowed out a warning.

Sabo swung and fired at the sound, then tried to back out of the light from the doorway. "Throw down yore gun, an' don't move another step," July warned.

Sabo fired again but the bullet went wild.

July spoke again. "This is a shoot-out, Sabo. If you walk away from it, I don't, or 't'other way round."

"You got me trapped in the light."

"Step out of it then."

SABO moved. Pete Wiley must have spotted July right then, because he opened fire, and lead tugged at July's sleeve. He didn't see Sonny, though, until Sonny opened up, and then Pete had his hands full on his own account. Sonny stalked forward, throwing lead, and probably taking some, too. But he was still on his own two feet when Pete Wiley went down, riddled from head to foot.

As July discovered later, every bullet had taken hold, and the one that finally brought him down, and took what life was left in him, had torn his throat wide open, and almost severed his head from his body.

July cut Sabo down to his knees at the first shot, but the scheming shyster didn't stop throwing lead. Gunflame lashed out from both guns. July felt a bullet strike his hat. Another hit the ground, and whined away between his legs. Sabo emptied one gun, and then drew another, a smaller calibre weapon, from the sound.

July's next shot almost lifted Sabo off the ground, and flung him back so his joints snapped, and wrung a shriek out of him that hung in the air for some time after Sabo lay dead on the ground.

* * *

Jim Keats cussed and swore the next morning when July told him Sonny Perdotte was coming to work on the B-Bar 13 place.

"Dammit all," he growled, indignantly. "What next?"

July pulled a moth-eaten dollar bill out of his pocket and said, "Eat this."

Jim stared. "What's the matter, you gone loco? I won't do anything of the kind."

"You said you would, Jim. This is the bill I gave Abe Sire. You said you'd eat it if I ever saw it again."

Jim gulped, and cussed again. Sonny had a bullet streak along his ribs, but he was feeling good because July had told him he could run his own horses with the B-Bar 13 stock, and earn wages besides, if Jim would stand for it.

The troopers had gone into town with Sabo's gun-hands. Kit had stayed at the ranch, because of a promise he had made himself, to tell Laura to her face how pretty she was. July didn't know about the promise, but he could see the results.

The two of them were standing together on the far side of the corral, and, from where he stood, it looked like he could have fired a gun at them, and neither of them would have noticed.

Trace Towne, with half his bandages off, had come out of the house to enjoy the air, and the sight of Kit in his Army uniform. Kit was his boy, the boy he thought he had lost to renegade Indians so long ago. The medallion Jim had found in the dust proved it.

July was sure that, somehow or other, these things had come about because he liked to give a man a lift along his way. Jim Keats was the only one who had a sour look on his face. Maybe Jim suddenly realized it, and finally knew the reason why, because, all at once, he reached out and took that damned bill July was holding out to him, and took a bite.

THE END

TENSLEEP — COLT CAVALIER!

By BART CASSIDY

A windmill and a woman turned Tensleep Maxon into Don Quixote for a day, but a squalling set of twins, and fast-flying .45 slugs convinced him that his true trail was the kind where a man can ride with the three best things in the world: a good horse, a clear conscience—and no damn' women!

GATHER 'round, you waddies who glorify your women. An' you wiry-whiskered gents who deem it proper to dust your gal off regular with doubled chaps. However you handle the frail vessel, as the feller said, don't never let her tears soften you like a cracker in hot soup. Hark to what landed astraddle uh me when I weakened.

I'm ridin' across Paradise Valley, sleepy, peace-lovin', covetin' no man's worldly goods. My backtrail's clear. My mind's easy. Zebra's full-bellied an' content. The sun's warm an' the medder larks are warbling'. Life's good. Then, suddenly, there's an open gate, a chatterin' windmill an' a brimmin' trough. Zebra whickers. I turn in.

It's a schoolhouse, but Saturday, with no

He cracks a cap, sends a slug whinin' after me.

kids an' no classes. Smoke lifts from the lean-to chimney. A woman's silken mystery stuff's dryin' on a line. Curtains at the winders. Geraniums beside the door. I light down to let Zebra drink, an' head for the spout. A female voice arrests me.

"That'll do, mister. Climb your horse and leave as you came, closing the gate behind you."

I whirl, on guard against a hatchet schoolma'am like some I suffered under. Then I'm clawin' off my hat. Holy Smoke! She's purty as a paint, straight as a lodgepole, snappin' brown eyes, lips made for kissin' purposes, strawberry blonde hair all curled at the neck. She's in tight fittin' blue silk an' her fists bore into her hips.

"Y-yes ma'am," I stammer. "Zebra hawss was thirsty an' I—"

"Not interested, and don't stare. Get out and don't open my gate again."

"Never opened it!" I bark. "An' it ain't seemly to hog water. Me, I can spit cotton till I hit a Cutback saloon, but Zebra's thirsty an' . . . here." I toss her a dollar, which she ketches, her jaw set. "Pay for water." Zebra's fightin' to get at the trough. The schoolma'am's mad wilts. She drops the money, buries her face, sobbin'. An' me a sucker for tears. I comfort her, my arm about her quiverin' shoulders.

"Don't, ma'am. Please don't cry. I'm sorry I got nasty thataway."

"It . . . it's me," she wails. "But I've had worries. If Charley'd only return."

"Who's Charley, ma'am? Why does his absence bring tears? If I can help. . . ." There I go, leadin' with my chin. Up bobs her tear-streaked face, her beautiful eyes wide with gratitude.

"You—you can," she sighs. "A ranch is man's work and, since dad's death, I've run the Arrow S into the ground. I mortgaged it to replace dad's scrubs."

"Oh-oh," I cackle. "You runnin' a cow outfit? A schoolma'am?"

She smiles, weak. "They needed a teacher; I needed money. Old Charley Hawker, with dad for twenty years, handles the ranch alone. He can't cover enough miles. Nobody could, and I can't afford more help. They've stolen my fancy Herefords. If I can't get them back, I may as well hand over Arrow S to the Cattleman's Bank. You offered to—"

"Yes'm," I hedge, "but I'll never change a banker's mind, except with lead."

"Not that," she protests. "When Charley discovered our loss, we agreed he'd better drift over the Tecolotes to Hidden Valley, where Blaze Gollober, a rough character, runs Herefords. Charley's been gone ten days. I've had no word, and didn't expect any, but he promised to be back in a week. I'm worried."

"An' want I should hunt him, is that it, ma'am?"

"No, it's not your trouble, and I'm broke. No, I'd like you to tell Mister Kingman—Luke Kingman, of the Cutback Brokerage Company—that I need him out here."

"Glad to do it, miss. Who'll I say needs him? An' what is he, a magician?"

She laughs. "Molly Sangster. I—he—we'll be married in the fall."

"That's nice, ma'am, if he's a good man. This'll cost you a cool drink, for Don Juan an' Zebra Jones."

"I'm sorry, Mister Jones." She hands back the dollar. "I *was* nasty, but they have deviled me plenty. Even stole my saddle pony so I couldn't get to the ranch today and tomorrow. Thank you!" She stands on tiptoes, kissin' me on the lips. Flabbergasted, I rub my mouth an' watch her hurry to the house. Whee-ew! Kingman's lucky.

CUTBACK CITY, nestlin' along Big Bug Crick, lies cool under towerin' trees. Cottonwood fuzz falls like snow as I ride in. With Zebra stalled in Til Henshaw's stable, I amble to the Cutback Brokerage. Kingman's tilted back, polished boots on the table, nose in a Denver paper. He straightens as I enter, comes up.

"Yes, sir. 'Mornin'. What's your business, mister?"

"Don Juan Jones," I grin. "Lady killer. Specialist in female distress."

"Yeah?" He's big, florid, heavy-shouldered an' forty—hardly the type for Molly. Blood rushes into his neck an' his eyes call me dirty names. "Hate yourself, don't you, Jones? What you want with me? Let's get on with it!"

"I bring you a message from Molly. She wants you at the schoolhouse, pronto."

His lips pull down. "Miss Sangster to you, saddle-bum. If you've pulled any Don Juan stuff with that gal, I'll—" I'm just far enough away. My fist crashes off his chin with a sound like a shot. Kingman staggers back, trips over a chair that smashes to kindling. He hits the floor bouncin', rolls over an' lays still.

"Mostly," I tell his unhearin' ears, "I'm long sufferin'. Can't savvy what hit me, but suddenly there's Molly's troubled face before me. Your lack uh faith left me nothin' else to do, brother. Nothin' else."

I turn outside, where the air's sweeter, an' hipper down to the Star of Colorado for a drink. The bartender, a sad slat with big ears, sets out Sunnybrook an' I'm sluicin' when spurs tinkle behind me. I whirl. There's Kingman lookin' me over an' just the right distance off again. I swing from the boot tops, a lulu that lifts him off the floor an' drops

him like a sack uh meat. One gets you ten he don't come to as fast as before.

"Bloody eyeballs!" raps the bartender, reaching for the scattergun. "Just why in the hell did you hit him?"

"When Luke Kingman wakes up," I tell him, blowin' on my knuckles, "you ask him."

"Luke?" he yelps. "That's Matt, Luke's twin brother!"

"Yipes!" I'm feelin' sick. "Twins! Why don't somebody tell me these things? Havin' just knocked Luke cold in his office, an' seein' what I thought was him breathin' down my neck, I—"

"I savvy, pilgrim, but it's still awful bad. You've just put away Cutback's two biggest men. Luke rods the town; Matt the range. You better duck quick . . . oh-oh, too late!" He skitters down the bar, watchin' the openin' door. Luke steps inside, his shoulders hunched, elbows angled over his guns, face Cain-branded. Here's something only smoke can cure an' I'm reachin' for my equalizer when Luke spots Matt on the floor. He starts, his anger turnin' to wonder. His arms relax. He straightens, takes three-four quick steps.

"Matt!" He grins big, shifts his glance. "You done this, Jones?"

"I can't lie," I quip. "I done it with my little meat hook."

"What a wallop," he said, admirin'. "I forgive you what you did to me, feller. So long as it's bad, I don't care what happens to this hog-bellied son of a—" He tars Matt with every dirty name, in United States, Piute an' Chinese. I gather he thinks his twin's behind all Big Bug's skullduggery, includin' Luke's own ranch losses.

When he's cussed empty, he says, "Thanks, Jones, and I can use you. Fighting pay. What I got, I earned. No hard feelings. After your trail drink, come see me. I guarantee no more breaks before a Don Juan. Be expectin' you." He leaves, penitent, an' I find myself likin' him.

Matt stirs, climbs onto his knees, rubbin' his jaw. His glance is more puzzled than hateful. Funny people, the Kingmans. "Pardon my curiosity," he sneers. "But howcome you hit me thataway with a sledgehammer?"

"The drinks is on me, feller," I confess. "Set 'em up, bartender. Havin' just cold-cocked Luke a few minutes before an' not knowin' he had a twin, I thought you was him breathin' down my neck. Of course, you an' him bein' twins, it's natural you'd hone to play each other's cards."

"Hell no!" he barks, gettin' up an' pourin' himself a drink. "I wouldn't feed that goat rotten meat if he was starvin' to death. He's a thief an' a blood-sucker that's stranglin' this valley to feather his own nest. What we need here's a first-class funeral."

"Brotherly love," I hooraw him, "is a plumb inspiring thing."

"I'll forgive you yore barbed tongue," he says, with Luke's same forebearance, "an' the dynamite you exploded under my chin. You look like cowfolks; what's yore business? Lookin' for a ridin' job?"

"If it's attractive enough."

"Use that gun yo're totin' as well as you use yore fists?"

"I know which end the smoke pours out of."

"Which can mean anything or nothin'. It's worth a hundred a month an' ca'tridges to learn which. Interested?"

"Tell yuh after the fourth drink, Kingman."

"I'll be at the Pillars most all day. If you decide, come let me know."

He turns away and leaves the barroom an' I don't wait for no more drinks. I pay my bill an' go on over to the bank, which is due to close in another hour. I pass up the short queues at the wickets an' bust through a door lettered: "Jason H. Daggers—President. Private." The room's full of smoke an' a fat, baldish man lays his cigar on a tray an' lifts a half nettled, half amused face from some papers on his desk.

"I guess you can't read, cowboy," he says, patient. "But not all of us can boast of an education, so I'll overlook your error. What do you want?"

"Information, not money," I grin. "You hold paper against the Arrow S. How much will it take to clear it?"

He shakes his head with the doleful air of a man who mebby should have played his cards different. "Sorry, my friend, but the bank sold that mortgage."

"To who, Daggers?"

He blinks, hesitates, then shrugs his shoulders. "I see no particular reason why I should or should not tell you," he says, "but because you're plainly interested in paying off the debt. . . ." He winks his eye devilish, "and who am I to decry so lovely an inspiration; the obligation is now due our up-and-coming financier—Luke Kingman. The mortgage is for ten thousand, and I imagine there is a matter of another thousand or so back interest. I hope you are successful, Mister—"

"Jones," I tell him. "Don Juan Jones. Thanks a lot, Mister Daggers."

I DON'T remember gettin' outa that bank, I'm so mad. Up-an'-comin' financier is right. Luke Kingman's a living example of one way to get rich. Makin' love to a lonely, hard-pressed gal as a cover-up while he robs her blind. Then tossin' her over when she can't pay an' takin' over her outfit for a small fraction of its worth. A gent like him would

rob the dead of their teeth for the gold in 'em, or kick the crutches out from under cripples. The snake. Thief an' blood-sucker, like Matt said.

I made up my mind right there which of the Kingman twins is right, for my money. They both may be black hearted so-an'-so's, But I ain't ag'in' workin' with Matt to help clean out that slimy up-an'-comin' Luke. An' the sooner the quicker.

Down at the Pillars, a gamblin' joint an' a fancy one, the houseman tells me that Matt's in a private room at the back, that he can't be disturbed. So I bust in, like I done at the bank. Matt an' a big horse-faced jigger are settin' at a table, whiskey an' big bundles of frogskins before 'em. As I shove the door inward, they both jerk up an' throw their guns at me. Cripes!

"You fool!" Matt raps. "Ain't you got sense enough to knock? That's the best way I know to get a bullet between the eyes. Blaze, this is the gunman I told you about, the one that iced Luke."

"An' also," I begin, but Matt barks, "To hell with the also, Jones. Shake hands with my associate, Blaze Gollober. You'll ride with him on the T Cross, in Hidden Valley."

I shake with the big work ox an' like to get my fingers twisted off. I don't like the laugh he vents as he scoffs, "Don Juan Jones, eh? Hmmm! Yore talents will be wasted in Hidden Valley unless you make a play fer them squaws in the Ute village at Stinkin' Springs."

"You shouldn't orta go puttin' ideas like that in my mind, Gollober," I protest. "I'm a squaw's one weakness. When do we start?"

"Matter of a hour," he scowls. "Hang around the bar; I'll be out directly."

He jerks his head at the door an I go out. Zebra's full of oats an' drowsy, not at all pleased to be took out of the cool stable an' tied before the Pillars. I'm sippin' my second drink at the bar when the door opens an' the sheriff comes in, headin' straight for me. Holy cow!

He's kind of shriveled up an' bandy-legged, well past the age when the big gun at his wasted ham means much in a land uh fast draws. But his pale gray eyes stab me like gimlets an' there's authority in his voice.

"Howdy, stranger. Just who do you claim to be an' what's yore business in Cutback City?"

"Who wants to know?" I ask, smart.

He flushes an' his eyes glitter an' he tells me off. "Yo're goin' as a gent with the loco name uh Don Juan Jones, which ain't no name ay-tall. You're a troublemaker an' too secretive about yore business here. As sheriff, I—"

"Whoa up," I interrupt. "The Montana Joneses wouldn't admire to hear you runnin' down the family name, Sheriff. An' as for my business, I've signed to ride for Matt Kingman, up in—"

"I'll check that," he barks. "Where at is Matt?"

"In the back room. Ask him, then I'll accept your apologies."

He hightails back an' busts in on Matt an' Blaze. An' me, I'm all hived out with a rash of the get-away itch. But before I can make up my mind, the door opens an' Gollober comes out. I don't like the grin he's wearin'.

"Come on, Jones," he says. "That ol' fossil, Sheriff Gabe Tennant, thinks yo're somebody that you ain't We better hightail for the ranch before he decides to throw you in the hoosegow. Le's ride."

Outside we climb our broncs an' lope outa town, hearin' nothin' from the law who, accordin' to Gollober's laughin' comment, is bein' held in augerment by Matt Kingman. We ride leisurely up the Big Bug Valley, Blaze provin' a congenial saddle mate, what with his bottle an' his pointin' out all the ranches an' tellin' funny yarns about this feller an' that.

At Point uh Rocks, we cut west on a little traveled road that winds up across the Coyote Hills, from the top uh which we get a breath-takin' view of Hidden Valley an' the Tecolotes beyond. Here Blaze draws rein an' makes a cigarette, hooks his leg around the horn an' stares down at a view that must be no particular bargain to him by this time. After a long silence, he laughs, nasty, an' says, "Don Juan Jones, ha, ha."

"What's so funny?"

"Sheriff Tennant was plumb shore that you was the hawss thief, Tensleep Maxon. Me an' Matt talked him mostly out of the idee, but I remember a poster I seen once an' I know he was right. Tensleep ain't interested in takin' a ridin' job on a lonely cow ranch; I know. Now just what is yore reasons for signin' on with Matt, huh?" His hand is on his gun an' he's lookin' at me with the white of a bronc eye. Cripes!

My trooper daddy used to say that honesty's the best policy, an' right now I savvy what he meant. So I tell the truth. "I signed with Matt 'cause I hate his brother as bad as he does. I figgered it would be a pleasure to mebbyso bust a few caps in his direction."

He squares around. "Now why should you hate Luke Kingman, Tensleep?"

" 'Cause he's triflin' with a good woman's affections whilst plannin' to rob her poor an' foreclose her out of her spread. Matt said it; he's a blood-suckin' tramp an' killin's too good fer him."

"So-o-o," he hums, his eyes narrow as he studies me. "You fell fer a purty face too?

How fur you committed to that Sangster gal, huh? You workin' for her by any chance?" There's new tightness in his voice an' I'm thinkin' of Ol' Charley Hawker, wonderin' if after all there is somethin' a man can do for him besides decent burial.

"Could be workin' for her an' mebbyso more," I brag, "except for that damned Luke Kingman. Another reason I'm for anybody who's ag'in' him."

He nods as if satisfied, but he stays silent an' broody as we wind down the switchbacks into Hidden Valley. Me, I'm marvelin' at what a beautiful hideaway the place is. Only narrow trails leading in, every inch visible from the ranch, down yonder in the cottonwoods. A few men with long range rifles could stand off an army.

THE sun is down behind the Tecolotes an' the air is growin' chill as we hit the flat an' lope to the ranch yard. Lights show through the dusk an' the smell of fryin' meat rides the breeze. Blaze is nervous as he lights down. "Put up the broncs, fork 'em down some hay an' then come in to supper. I'll be payin' off the men."

He strides to'rds the chuck shack an' I take the ponies into the barn. Instead of stallin' 'em, I tie 'em near the door, slip out back, crawl between the corral bars an' foller a fringe of crick willows. A minute later, I'm posted at the corner of the grub house, my ear to the wall.

". . . an' this is it, you old goat," Blaze is sayin', fierce-like. "Way the game breaks, you gotta be outa here, pronto. You can go out ridin', drawin' pay at both ends, or you can go out stiff, to a buzzard gulch. Make up yore mind—now."

"To hell with you, Gollober." It's the cracked voice of some nervy old-timer, shrill an' uncurried. An' though I can't see him an' wouldn't know him if I could, I know it's Old Charley Hawker, of the Arrow S. "My boss sent me here to find her lost cattle. Way yo're actin', I know you stole 'em. If I go back, it'll not be to spend yore filthy mazuma, but to have you sent up as a yella-bellied thief. If I don't get back, they'll know you done me in an' it'll mean the end of you. I'm checkin' the bet back to you, yuh buzzard."

"Don't say you didn't have yore chance, you stubborn jackass," snarls Gollober. "I'm done fooling around with you. I brought a killer with me an' I'll have him take you out, directly he comes from stallin' the ponies. Feller name uh Tensleep Maxon. Hassayamp, you'll go along to make damn' shore he don't talk Tensleep out of it. Where is that gent? He must be tuckin' them horses in." I hear him stridin' to the door an' fade back between the two buildings. Then I hear Gollober yell, "Rider comin' down the trail, hell fer leather!"

They come swarmin' out, ready for a fight. Beside Blaze, I can count six cowpokes an' the cook, all bristlin' with guns an' ready for war. They watch the rider come peltin' through the half light an' he must know they're a itchy-fingered crew, 'cause his beller comes reachin' across the flats. "Blaze! It's Matt yodlin'. Get that Hawker hombre out of sight an' move them Herefords back into the breaks. Luke's bringin' the sheriff an' a posse into the valley! They're right behind me!"

If he'd dropped a bomb amongst 'em, it couldn't uh shook 'em up worse. Blaze starts hollerin' orders. "Hassayamp, you take Ol' Charley to that Injun cave in Red Cliffs. An' tie him so's he can't get loose. Then cut across to help chouse them critters. Keno, you an' Heck work up the east side, laggin' every cow to'rds the Pinnacles. Ornery, you an' Long Drink work the west side an' fast, throwin 'all stuff across the crick. Bourbon, you an' Doughbelly take up the crick. Matt an' Tensleep an' me—we'll work the roughs of the Coyotes. An' don't let no grass grow under yore feet. Snap into it!"

They bust for the corrals at a run, ganglin' Hassayamp duckin' back into the cookshack for Hawker. It's still light enough to be plenty chancy, but I step to'rds the door, Colt in hand. Hassayamp's on his knees, workin' at the knots bindin' the feet of Charley Hawker—a pint-sized, whiskery old gent with blazin' fires in his pale blue eyes.

Hassayamp looks up as I enter, rears to his feet, gun whippin' out. He hesitates just a moment, not knowin' who I am. He must read my purpose in my eyes, for his lips skin back an' his gun tilts up, blazin'. He's stumblin' as he triggers, my slug through his chest. His bullet burns my thigh an' I leap across his body, flippin' open my jackknife an' cuttin' Charley loose. "Out back, quick!" I blat, an' turn to the door, beyond which Blaze is hollerin'.

"Where's that Tensleep? Where's that damned horsethief? Hey, what's that shootin'? Long Drink, Keno! Git in there an' see if—"

Behind me, Charley croaks, "Look out, feller. Whatever from hell miracle fetched you here?" He tries his laigs an' they let him down. I throw a slug at the feet of the pair chargin' the door. They keep comin', shootin' back. I drop one, slam an' bar the door.

Charley can't get up, he's bin tied to his chair too long. So I pick him up, all hundred pounds of him, an' stumble out through the kitchen an' into the gatherin' darkness. "Got two ponies at the barn," I tell Charley. "If we can only make it."

Which it looks like we will. I gain the willows without bein' challenged, foller 'em

to the corner of the corral, where I find the renegades has legged it back to the cook-shack. I'm halfway to the barn, huggin' the pole fence, when somebody hollers.

"There they go now!"

Bullets whistle around my pumpin' laigs, one nickin' my calf an' spillin' me an' my load. Now they're comin' at a run, cursin', shootin'. I slow 'em down with a couple uh shots, pick up Charley again an' reel to'rds the horses.

Just then, Blaze's pony busts loose an' flashes out the barn door, stirrups poppin'. Behind him comes Zebra, a renegade on his back. It makes me so bad I shoot without warnin'. The feller pitchpoles from the saddle an' Zebra slants away, plumb terrified. Now we're trapped. Cripes!

Anyhow, we've got a gun an' ca'tridges fer Charley an' we're in the doubtful shelter of the barn, from where we can easy keep Blaze an' his men from their broncs. It's their bet an' Matt Kingman's a crazy man.

"You yella-bellied bunglers!" he roars. "You whiskey-guzzlin' stink lizards! You let 'em get into that barn an' cut us off from our ponies. Well, you kin charge in an' pistol them two like you was men, or else—"

"Or else what?" bellers Blaze, hostile. "You forget you was the one who laughed off that fist-swingin' gunnie bein' Tensleep, which a more treacherous rat never drawed breath. Pistol him yore ownself. Me an' my men will chance tellin' the posse the truth about you stealin' them Arrow S whitefaces an' quarterin' 'em onto me."

"You dirty double-crossin' traitor," rants Matt. "After all I've did fer you. I oughta—"

"Oughta what, you big four-flusher?"

Two guns flashin' through the dusk. Clump of a fallin' body. An' Matt Kingman gloatin': "That cooks his turkey, the snake. Anybody else want some of the same?"

HIS answer is silence, through which comes the roar of hawssbackers comin' down the grade an' a guarded hail from the trail comin' in from the Tecolotes. "Hey there! What's all the shootin' fer?"

"That you, Shorty?" Matt's voice is hungry. "How'd you come out? Get her?"

"Tied like a market veal, Matt. She's a fightin' hellcat an' I'm glad to be shet of her."

"Shet hell! We got trouble here. That damned brother uh mine's won over Gabe Tennant. They're leadin' in a posse. Take her to my rooms in Cutback City. No, that won't do. Take her to the Injun cave an' tie her good. Then come back here. We got war."

"Hold down the fort," I tell Charley. "The Don Juan in me is clamorin'."

I slip out into the corral, slide under the fence an' quarter in on the blocky rider an' the gagged gal roped to her saddle till she can't move. He's jerkin' on the lead rope, ready to hunt the Injun cave, when I call, "Shorty!" soft.

He twists in the saddle, drivin' his gunhand to holster. "Who's that?"

"Ol' Man Doom!" I tell him, an' tumble him outa his leather.

I have a few bad moments ketchin' Molly Sangster's pony, cuttin' her loose an' carryin' her across the corral an' into the barn. The meetin' between her an' Charley is sorta pitiful. They're both so weak on their pins they have to cling to one another, just clingin' an' sobbin', too glad an' too affected to be able to say the things in their hearts.

Presently she says, "How can I thank you, Mister Jones? Mister Kingman came out in answer to your message, and he brought me the best news. He bought my mortgage from the bank and we burned it together, there in the schoolhouse stove. We've decided to get married right away, just as soon as he can clean out this nest of outlaws—one his own twin brother. I-I guess that's him now."

Wow! Right there's the end of my reputation as a guesser. I had two choices an' made the wrong one. In spite uh that, my luck's been good so far. But it ain't over yet, as the sudden roar of hoofs an' blast of shortguns attests. In the tumult, I hear the shrill, almost hysterical whinnyin' of Zebra Hawss. I whistle an' he comes chargin' for the stable door. But he's scairt an' skittish an' he won't come in. So I step out an' take his bridle. An' then, from the corner of the barn, snaps a low, deadly voice.

"All right, Tensleep! Take hold of his bridle an' lead him to me. An' watch yore gunhand. I'd soon as not kill you. Sooner."

A glance across my shoulder shows his gun cocked an' level. To draw is suicide so I take Zebra's bridle, turn an' walk to'rds Matt, leadin' the pony. The sounds of battle—shootin', men yellin' an' cursin' an' the scream of a wounded horse—these swell to a high pitch an' then sorta dissolve to scattered shots as the renegades go down or run.

One step, two steps . . . five steps! Matt's gun holdin' steadily on my belly. I know he'll fire the second I hand him the reins. There's no other out; I'll have to draw an' make my fight before that happens. Now I'm only two strides away from him. He reaches out his left hand. I extend mine, with the reins in it, an' take another step. Then I drive my right hand in the draw. A gun blares in the barn doorway, followed by Old Charley's high-pitched rebel yell.

The bullet takes Matt high up, rockin' him off balance, makin' him miss. His gun flash half blinds me. Hot powder burns my wrist.

(Please turn to page 98)

FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

WILLIAM · J · McDONALD

1

Billy McDonald's dad was killed at the Battle of Corinth. In 1862 the boy acted as sole escort for his mother in a long trek from Mississippi to Texas. Attacked by Comanches, Billy saved his mother and their wagon. He was only ten years of age at the time.

2

When Bill was 33 he sold Judge Melvin some cattle for which the judge foolishly gave him a bad check. When the check bounced back, Bill bounced his gun-barrel on the judge's head and collected cash. From 1885 to 1888 McDonald fought outlaws in the Panhandle; killed 18.

3

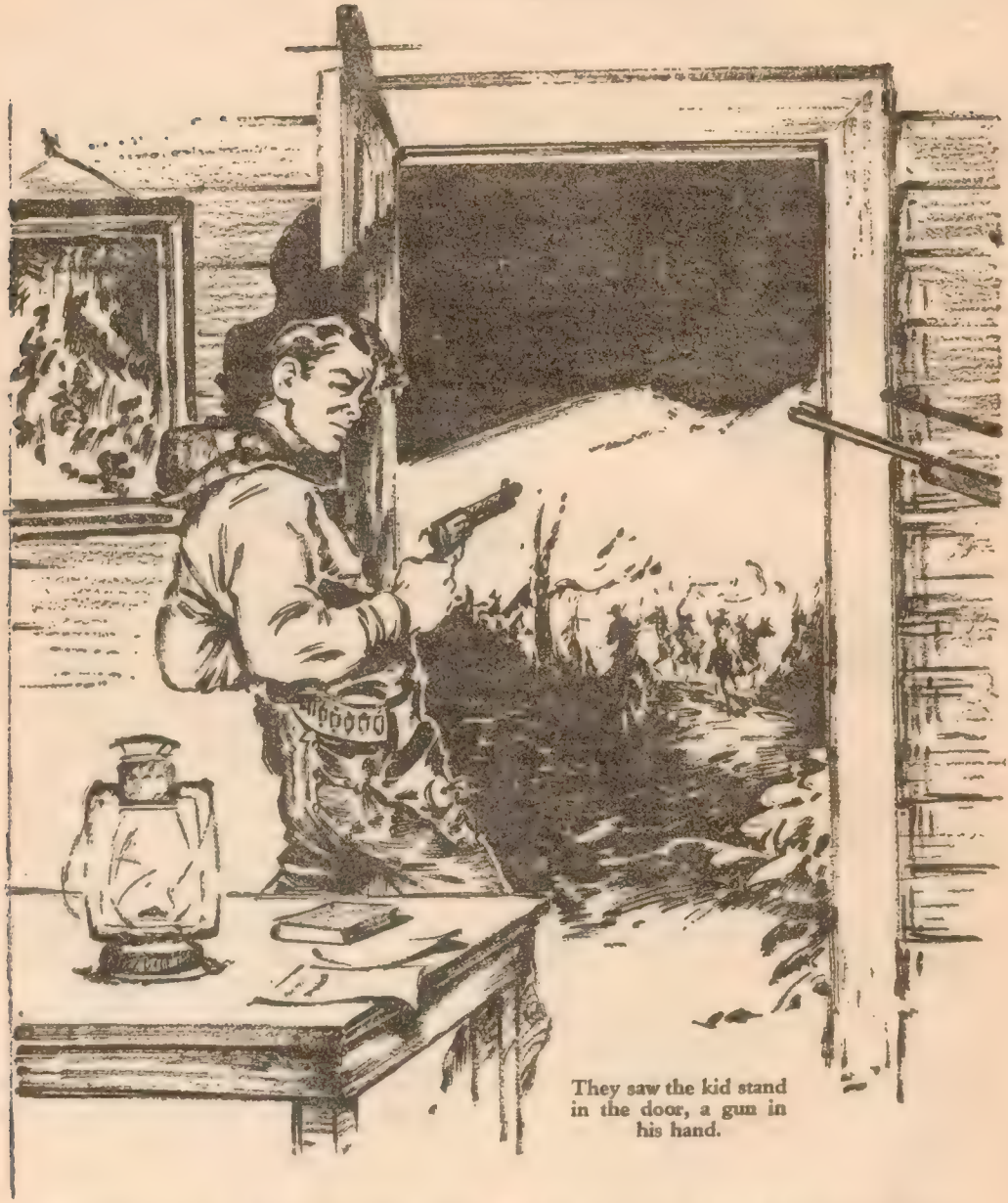
In 1891 McDonald was made Captain of Texas Rangers. In 1895 he almost created an international 'incident' by going into Mexico and bringing back the vicious renegades Mathews and Erwin without bothering to wait for extradition papers.

4

He broke up the Buzzard's Hole gang and the San Saba Murder Society; checked an Army riot at Brownsville, Texas, single-handed. In 1906 he killed seven murderous bandits at Rio Grande City in a sixty-second gun fight. He rounded out a life of service to his country by serving as a Revenue Officer.

THE OUTCAST RIDES BACK

By VAN CORT



They saw the kid stand in the door, a gun in his hand.

Come hell or high water, Brett Tyler swore, his fists, guns and, if necessary, his life, were dedicated to his town's election, even if it meant betrayal of his fighting blood-kin—and the sacred memory of a no-surrender sire, who had died so that Brett might live to fight another day!

A Novelette

CHAPTER ONE

Owlhoot Allies

BRETT was lying, fully clothed, on his bed in the room at the top of the stairs in the old Tyler ranchhouse. The unpainted house, once pretentious in design, had a sag back roof and weather cracked walls studded with broken window panes. The structure was a great, rambling monument to the past.

Fifteen-year-old Brett stared into the sleepy flame of the lantern hanging on a rafter nail and listened to the bullfrogs croak. Somewhere, far back, he had once heard his mother say, there had been a distant cousin of his who had become President of the United States.

But his mother had been dead these five years. Maybe there wasn't anything to it . . .

He sat suddenly upright, put his booted feet over the side of the bed onto the wide, cracked floor boards and stood up, tense, his mouth and eyes wide, his breathing rapid. He couldn't hear the bullfrogs at all now but the two shots from beyond the far hill pasture still echoed in his ears. His hand automatically reached out and turned down the lantern wick.

He could see nothing from the open window but he had no trouble hearing the thunder of many cattle rushing past the corrals and pastures and through the little hill pass behind the ranch. Again came the reports of scattered shots.

He was downstairs and in the front doorway when his brother Con, his cousin Brade, and two riders, Sam and Shaw, moved across the dark yard carrying something heavy between them.

"Get out of the way, kid," Con said, and brushed him aside. "If you want to do some good get whiskey and hot water."

The four men, lugging their burden, trudged past him and up the stairs.

The faint light in the hall had shown the boy the limp, bleeding body of his father. Beyond the ranch outskirts firing still continued; five more men rode with the Tylers besides Sam and Shaw, and it must be them answering the shots of the Ferguson clan.

Shaw, Sam, then Brade came clomping back down the stairs and carrying their rifles. Cousin Brade saw the kid stand in the door, a gun in his hand.

"Hustle with that bottle, kid," Brade said. "Your old man is pegging out. Forget that six-shooter now." His bear-like bulk vanished in the night.

Brett saw himself in the hall rack mirror as he came by a moment later, a steaming kettle in one hand, the whiskey bottle in the other. His eyes were saucer-large, his face white and his knees wobbly. This was the end of the world—or something just as bad.

The Tylers had been long-roping beef for a good while and had made a stack of money selling it. Now, tonight, the jug was going to the well once too often and coming home without ears.

The picked, carefully vented herd that they had been collecting for more than a month had suddenly been jumped by the Fergusons and their friends. The jig was up.

THERE was a queer anger in Brett over the fact that he had never been allowed to take part in any night-riding or beef stealing; never had a running iron in his hand. He was the baby of the family, thin, hollow-chested and delicate. He could ride and shoot as well as any man, but his father's song to him had always been, "Get out of the way, kid! You want to get hurt? Get out of the way!"

Now he found the old man lying flat on his back in the big double bed he used to share with Brett's mother. He was over six feet, a huge man with deep blue eyes and black hair. He looked weird to Brett, lying there, no longer gesticulating with his long arms and huge hands and roaring and cursing. Even so, still and dying, he seemed to dominate the room.

"Get . . . my boots off, Con," he said with difficulty. ". . . promised your Ma . . . I wouldn't die with 'em on. . . ."

Con was at the head of the bed, trying to make a chest bandage. He took the whiskey and hot water from Brett, mixed a slug in a glass and held it to his father's lips. But the old man raised up on his elbows and fixed a stare on the boy at the foot of the bed.

"I'm done for," he said clearly. "You, Con, get the kid out of here . . . Give him some money . . . tell him to get the hell out of here an' never come back. You hear me? Never come back, kid! Hear me? I promised his ma . . . Hear me?"

"All right," Con said. "Don't talk so much! You'll be. . . ."

As Brett watched, the stare in those strong eyes faded like a light dimming behind windows.

Con straightened up and closed Jackson Tyler's eyes, then took the whiskey bottle and pointed the bottom toward the ceiling. He set it down on the table and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. When he tramped downstairs and grabbed his rifle in the hall, Brett was right behind him, reaching for his own Winchester.

Outside, the firing was scattered beyond the hill pass, but it had increased. Con, tall and angular, stood in the doorway trying to judge what it meant. Suddenly he turned and put a hard, flat hand on Brett's chest.

"You stay here. Where you think you're goin' with that rifle, kid?"

Brett tried to answer but Con gave him no chance. He nodded toward the stairs. "You stay here. Hear me?"

Brett stumbled back against the bottom step and sat down. The last two words had sounded as though his dead father had spoken them. Con disappeared into the night and Brett just sat there, staring, staring. . . .

When Brett woke it was daylight and the yard outside was filling with strange riders. He grabbed the rifle, leveled a shell into the chamber and stepped into the doorway.

Men were dismounting leisurely in a cloud of dust. Suddenly a voice broke through the clatter of boots and squeak of leather. "Hey,

who the hell is the cock-rooster in the doorway? Put up your gun, sonny; everything is hunky-dory!"

It was a laughing, confident voice. Brett saw Con and Shaw at the gate; their hands were free and they still had their guns. Hastily he stacked the rifle against the door.

The man who hailed him was only a few years Brett's senior. A sloppy, carelessly-dressed hombre, he slid out of the saddle.

He sauntered up the steps. "Where were you when the shooting went on, boy?" he drawled. "We had a pretty hot time of it, the rest of us."

Cousin Brade suddenly showed up. "Never mind about that, Billy," he said hastily. "Come on inside and we'll have breakfast." He turned to Brett. "This is Ringo Billy. You've heard of him."

Brett stared. Billy had already entered the house, strolling through the hall into the dining room. This Billy, it was said, had already killed as many men as his nineteen years, not counting Mexicans.

CHAPTER TWO

California Ticket

IN THE long, dark-raftered, dining room, Billy was sitting in the head-end chair, his Mexican spur rowels hooked into the table while he rolled a smoke. "This is all right," he commented. "An okay headquarters...." He suddenly raised his voice to a howl. "Hustle them vittels!"

Somebody clattered with pots and pans in the kitchen. Tyler men and Ringo riders drifted in, reloading and oiling their guns while they talked about the night's happenings. Cousin Brade was sitting near Billy, talking eagerly, and the two were passing a half-empty bottle between them as if they couldn't get it finished fast enough.

Brett, standing inside the door, gathered from the talk that Brade, knowing that Billy and his men were in the neighborhood, had sent a rider for him without consulting Brett's father or Con. In the nick of time the outlaw and his band had arrived to take a hand in the fighting, driving off the Ferguson men and their vigilantes. The stolen herd was still safe in the back hills and the enemy was licking his wounds.

One of the men belched loudly and somebody laughed; men clattered with their knives on the table, hollering for their breakfast. Suddenly Brett's voice rang through the room.

"Don't make so much noise! My father is dead upstairs!"

They all looked at him. Billy said, "Well, he can't hear us then, can he? So shut up."

A man offered Brett a bottle. "Have a drink, sonny."

A roar of laughter went up but Billy was somehow annoyed. "He don't use that kind, Clant," he drawled. "It's got to have a nipple on it."

In the next instant the bottle in the outlaw's hand lost its neck and smoke swirled from Brett's pistol. It was a tricky shot, between two men. The bullet buried itself in the plaster wall by the kitchen door.

Both Billy's guns were drawn instantly despite the fact that he was sitting. "Get that damned kid out of here!" he roared.

But Con was suddenly in the room knocking Brett's gunhand high. "What the hell goes on here? Simmer down, kid! What got into you?" His roaring voice calmed the room; he sounded and acted like his father. He swung Brett out into the hallway. "Get out of here, Kid. Get out! Keep out of the way. You want to get killed?"

From the hall, Brett watched Con re-enter the dining room. He did not look pleased at the sight of Billy at the head of the table. Jackson Tyler had always let Brett's mother sit there when she was alive.

By now the two men who had been busy in the kitchen swung the door open and slid platters of eggs, bacon and biscuits onto the table. The coffee pot got busy, the men falling greedily to the food. Brett turned his back and went upstairs.

Long after, Con found him. His face was grave. "Come on down in the office," Con said. "I want to talk to you."

Brade was already there; his eyes bulged as Con Tyler drew a sheaf of bills from his pocket and began laying them in Brett's hand. "You're leaving, kid."

"I can do my share. I'm a Tyler like the rest of you."

Con's voice was almost soft. He kept handing the bills over. "Maybe that's the trouble. You better forget about that."

Brade, his eyes on the money, said, "Why don't you let the kid stay if he wants to. He's good with a gun. I can't see why you don't let him take his chances with the rest of us."

"No," Con said roughly. "He gets out."

"This is my home," Brett said. "I want to stay."

"Shut up. Pa is dead and I aim to get even for that. It'll be a dirty fight from now on and we don't know where it ends." He added with a grimace as if he were tasting something sour, "Mebbe we never were much but hillside owlhoots fitten to ride with the likes of Billy. I don't know. But you're gettin' out. Ride down to Ferguson and buy a ticket on the rattler. Hit west and south; go into the desert where your lungs have a chance. Leave the horse at the depot. Nobody'll molest a kid."

"You're making a mistake," Brade said. "The kid has a right—"

"Shut up," Con said. "I'm still boss."

Later, when Brett was riding out of the yard, Con stood, tall and almost sinister at the end of the gallery, watching him. Behind him Ringo's men were carousing in the house, drinking and singing.

"And don't come back this way, kid," Con said.

Brett looked back once and suddenly remembered his mother, and the smell of apple pie; and his dog, Whip, that he used to play with in the orchard behind the house. Then he faced ahead and thought of Brade bringing in the Ringo gang, of the stolen cattle, of Billy with his spurs on the table; and when he faced ahead again the Tyler ranch, as he had known it, had ceased to be.

He got another remembrance when riding through Ferguson. Swinging through the east end of town, he skirted the end of Grant street and, before realizing it, was riding past the Ferguson town house. It was well-kept and white-painted; there was a lawn and a picket fence. Some children played on the lawn, and seeing him, climbed on the fence. A small dark-haired girl of about ten recognized the brand on his horse.

"Tyler! Tyler!" she screamed. "Dirty Tyler! You shot my dad!"

The other children took up the cry and soon clods of earth and small stones sailed through the air after him. The horse of its own volition went into a trot. Brett, red with fury, forced himself not to look back. But he had a picture of the girl: her eyes, her angry mouth and her flying dark hair, imprinted indelibly on his mind.

He reached the depot, swept the saddle off the horse beyond the cattle pens and let the pony run, then walked with his gear to the ticket window.

He'd come back some day and clean house, he swore inwardly. He'd come back and throw that Billy and his gang out. He knew it suddenly. A Tyler had been President once. . . .

"Gimme a ticket to Californy," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Homecoming

THE conductor opened the door to the coach and called in, rousing the sleepy passengers, "Ferguson in fifteen minutes. Change for stage to Cherokee, Carson's Gulch and points north. . . ."

The door slammed shut again and the quick blast of train draft sucked at the oil lamps and bobbed their flames. The long wooden coach swayed and rocked and the poorly-laid rails to the sound of the wheels and the distant puffing of the engine. Outside, the night air rushed past and made a whistling background for the snoring of cowhands and drummers, the scattering of immigrants and railroad workers that almost filled the car.

Brett Tyler sat up with a jerk, shook his head and was almost awake. The conductor's call hung in his hearing, somehow like the two shots that had awakened him years ago, the night his father was killed.

He stood up, then, and stretched his tall frame and in so doing seemed to shed the miles of the weary day-long coach ride. As he saw his dimly-lit reflection in the coach window against the night outside, he almost shed the years also. For a moment he saw the reflected image of a skinny, flat-chested kid with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a steaming kettle in the other.

He ran a strong, sunbrowned, but not too-rough hand through his thick hair and eased his hat on. He buttoned his short riding coat, glanced down at his boots.

He was a trim man, a cut of the military about him. His mouth was full-lipped but hard, his cheeks flat. There was a composure and balance about his expression which belied the quick temper underneath. As he began walking toward the front of the coach he noticed that the girl who had been in the second seat, and whom he had watched from a distance, was no longer there. Somehow her dark hair and fair complexion, her arrogant bearing, seemed familiar.

On the coach platform, as he closed the door behind him, he saw her standing near the wrought-iron railing. Their eyes met for a moment. He found her as beautiful as she had seemed at a distance.

He nodded toward the town. "Your destination, too?"

She measured him momentarily and then nodded.

"Your home town?" he asked.

She raised an eyebrow slightly. "Yes."

"Mine, too," he said. "Haven't been there for ten years or so. I wonder what it looks like by now."

"It has changed considerably. I'm coming home to vote; to keep it from changing still further."

"Vote?" he said.

"My uncle, Jim Ferguson, is running for mayor."

He made a slight bow. "Tyler. Brett Tyler, at your service."

She measured him. "I'll grant you don't look much like a Tyler," she said slowly. "If you haven't been here for ten years I suggest that you don't get off the train." She turned to enter the coach.

"I remember you now," he said. "You were a little girl playing on the lawn in front of your house. You threw stones at me when I rode by."

"I probably did."

"A moment," he said, his heart quickening with excitement. "Miss Ferguson, I'm willing to forget about the stones if you'll allow me to help you with your bags."

She faced him once more. "Thanks, there will be someone at the station. I still think you could do well by taking my advice. Don't get off the train."

He laughed shortly. "I reckon I couldn't do that. As a matter of fact, I'd like permission to call on you sometime."

She threw back her head then and laughed, harshly and yet with a strange worried curiosity in her eyes. "I'd like to see a Tyler call on me. Yes, I would indeed!"

He bowed slightly again, the shadow of a smile in his eyes. "Maybe, then, I will," he said as she closed the coach door squarely in his face.

THE train pounded into the station with a jarring of brakes, and Brett reentered the coach, went past the girl to his own seat and got down his bag and suitcase.

No one had entered the coach to fetch the girl's bags. Outside, in the depot area, a band was suddenly blaring forth discordantly. Cat calls and whistles, accompanied by pistol shots in the air, heightened the impression that all the town's drunks were on hand to meet the train.

In the station lights Brett saw a canvas banner carried high on two poles by a couple of hilarious men who obviously were no strangers to the bottle. The banner read:

TYLER FOR MAYOR

The crowd swirled around the banner, the band played on, and beyond the crowd a white-haired man in the seat of a buckboard attempted to quiet two boogered horses. A solitary gent was holding the rearing horses by the bridles, but to little avail. The six passengers who had gotten off the train were staring dumbly at the spectacle while the crowd urged them to cast their vote for Tyler. The Ferguson girl on the train platform was looking at the white-haired man and the buckboard.

It took Brett seconds to re-enter the coach, gather up her bags, deposit them on the ground beside his own and hand their owner down as the train got ready to get underway again.

"Wait here a moment," he told her.

He walked over to the bandleader and grabbed the man's arm. "Stop that damned racket," Brett said. "Shut them up!"

The musician took a second look at Brett and managed to quiet his bandsmen. The crowd suddenly went quiet in surprise.

"That's better," Brett said. "Just hold it that way till I get this lady to her carriage."

He walked back to the girl, picked up the baggage and began leading her to the buckboard. The crowd was raising a growl. A swarthy, half-drunk puncher swung into Brett's path with a scowl, "Who in hell do you—"

Brett Tyler dropped the bags and punched the man squarely in the teeth. The cowboy went back and down. Somebody tittered. In the next instant Brett jumped forward and kicked the drawn pistol from the puncher's hand. A backhanded slap flattened the man out and left him sprawled in the dust.

Brett walked the girl the last few steps to the buckboard, from which the white-haired man had now descended. He hurried toward Brett, greeting the girl warmly, and began taking charge of the baggage.

"I'm much obliged to you, sir."

Between the two of them they got the girl and the baggage aboard. "Jason couldn't come, Sheila," the old man explained. "The town has gone wild, as you can see. Main Street is worse than this, even. He's trying to keep order with every deputy he can get." The old gent climbed up and took his place alongside Sheila.

"I'm sorry about this," Brett said to Sheila Ferguson, with a gesture at the crowd. The old man was about to indicate the back of the buckboard with an invitation to Brett to get on, when the girl said, "Thank you very much, Mr. Tyler."

"Tyler?" The old man's jaw dropped. "Tyler . . . I—" At that moment the man at the bridles swung the horses from the depot and let them go. The vehicle started out into the dark and was gone in a matter of seconds. Brett stood there for a moment, staring. . . .

The band was playing again. Brett ignored the curious, angry stares of the crowd and walked over to a large placard pasted on the depot wall.

Cousin Brade Tyler had grown heavy and florid. The picture showed him wearing a congressman hat and shoestring tie. He was pasty-faced, but the eyes were there, clear and sharp and cunning, like those of a sly bear. All in all, Brett thought, he looked like a cheap saloon keeper posing as a solid citizen.

"I'll be damned," he said half amused and reached out a hand to straighten the poster, in order to see it better.

A gun hammer clicked behind him. "And what in hell do you think you're gonna do to that poster?"

Brett turned slowly and faced the man.

Again, as if a curtain had been drawn, the years slid back. Ringo Billy was exactly the same as when he had hollered to Con Tyler to "get that damned kid out of here!" He was better dressed now, his face a little older. But he had the same reckless, insolent look in his curious eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gamblers' Town

BRETT let his glance ride past the outlaw, to Brade Tyler, in the flesh. Tyler was peering annoyedly at him past Ringo's shoulder.

Brett said, "How are you, Brade?"

The other scowled. "Huh, who's this?" Then: "Brett, by God!" He came forward. "Yes, it's Brett." There was a silence as he stared with cold curiosity. "How are you?"

The crowd watched, puzzled, as the two men shook hands mechanically. They had caught the name Tyler.

Brade said, "Well, Brett, some surprise. What're you doing in these parts?"

"This is my home town, Brade," Brett said.

"You mean," Ringo Billy cut in suddenly, "that this is the kid who shot the bottle out of Clant Wickam's hand?"

"The same," Brade said. "You remember Billy, Brett?"

"I'll be damned!" Billy said. He did not offer to shake hands; and there was no welcome in his face. "Come home to vote for your cousin, hey?"

"I didn't know the Tylers had entered politics," Brett said.

Brade broke the impasse. "What are we standing here for? Come on! Come on! We'll go have a drink of welcome." As Brett glanced at his bags, Brade called to a man in the crowd, "Bring them up to Ackerman's, will you, Joe?"

They swung away from the depot and up Main Street. It had always been Brade who knew where there was cattle to grab, and where it best could be sold. It had been Brade who had the ideas; Brett's father and Con who carried them out. And now Cousin Brade, of the hillside owlhoots could call to a man in town and tell him to carry bags for him.

Brett said, "How are you making out with the Fergusons?"

"Got them on the run," Brade said. "Been riding circles around them for years. The Tylers are getting big, Brett, mighty big. We sit in the council now. After this election the Fergusons won't."

Ferguson town had had its share of honky-tonks, dance halls and such, as Brett vaguely remembered it, but they had all been confined to the north side of town—to Front and River Streets. Now the center section of Main was packed with them. Saloons had crowded out business houses. Gambling joints elbowed dance halls on either side and the traffic was lively. The electioneering band was much in evidence, horses packed the rails and loafers and adventurers swarmed on the boardwalks.

All greeted Brade with deference as the three men progressed. "My voters," he said with an expansive gesture at the motley crowd.

They had stopped outside Ackerman's Emporium, a huge, gaudy place with three mirror-glass double doors. "The people's choice," said Brett.

"We'll change the name of the town to Tylerville after the election," Brade said.

Brett's glance swept the rowdy scene and his lips curled. "It will probably be appropriate."

Brade caught the sarcasm this time. "Why did you come back here?" he demanded. "You need money?" He was almost impatient.

"No," Brett said, "I don't need money."

Inside, Lew Ackerman came forward and conducted them to a table near the bar. The place was full, the gambling tables well attended and the bar lined three deep. Girls passed among the customers. Ackerman, Brett remembered, ran a dirty, small saloon on the north side in the old days. He had owned dubious fame for blasting off a customer's face in a brawl, with a shotgun.

The four men sat down. "You picked just the right time to hit town," Ackerman said. "It'll be nice to cast your vote for Brade, day after tomorrow."

Brett said flatly, "Will it?"

Ackerman squinted at him. Ringo Billy sat rocking back in his chair. Brade fidgeted.

"How is Con?" Brett eventually said. "How is the old place?"

Ackerman and Brade exchanged glances. "Con's pretty much the same," Brade said. "He's fixed the place up some. Me, I live in town. What you been doing with yourself?"

Brett Tyler told them sketchily. "A turn in the army . . . tried my hand at goldmining . . . some ranching. Seen quite a bit of the country." He felt that they were not so much interested in what he had done as in what he was and where he stood now.

A MUCH bejeweled blonde stopped by the table. She poured a fresh drink for Brade as the latter put his arm about her waist.

Brett got to his feet. "Kind of tired from the trip, Brade. Guess I'll go look for a place to stay. Tomorrow I figure on riding out to see Con."

"Why, hell," Ackerman said with a mechanical smile, "the best rooms in town are upstairs." He winked at Brade and Billy. "We have everything here . . . why go further?"

Brett said, "Thanks, but I want some sleep. I guess I need a quieter place."

Ackerman shrugged. "Okay by me. Glad to have met you, though. Come in when you want anything."

Brett nodded, picked up his bags and left. Outside he caught a boy by the shoulder. "Want to earn six bits? Take these to Grant Hotel?"

"Sure enough, mister." A pair of eager eyes lit up, a hand pocketed the coins and the bags were on their way. As Brett was about to step off the boardwalk at the corner to cross the street, a hand tapped his shoulder.

Billy Ringo said, "I want to talk to you."

"Talk?"

"Why waste breath," the outlaw said. "You don't fit in the picture here. Be smart and move on. You don't fool me none."

"Maybe I wasn't trying."

"Then we know where we stand," Ringo said, his hand on Brett's elbow, "You're not for Brade, I can see that. Well, don't come here wearing your stinking halo. I never did like the looks of you."

"You've seen me twice in your life," Brett said.

"That's enough."

Brett's eyes got hard. "Maybe you better go and sober up"

"To hell with your sober-up," Ringo said. "You try any funny business with this election and I'll put a couple of holes in you."

This was almost funny. Brade measured the other man, then said, "Try it, friend, and you might find yourself too late for breakfast."

Ringo backed away. The crowd began to scramble.

Brade suddenly was at Billy's side. "What the hell is this? What goes on here?" He took the other by the arm. "You want to make damned fools of us all?"

He almost pushed Ringo back into the saloon. A moment later he was back, catching Brett crossing the street. Sweat stood out on his forehead as he talked rapidly.

"This is bad, Brett! No good at all. For God's sake, don't fool with Billy. Don't rile him."

"He was riling *me,*" Brett said.

Brade Tyler shook his head. "You should have never have come back. You were hobnobbing with Sheila Ferguson and her uncle at the station, carrying her bags and making up. Now what the hell kind of business is that, I ask you? Are you loco?" He put the gnawing question again: "Why did you come back, Brett?"

If he had had doubts before, Brett knew suddenly why he had come back. He shook his head. "You would never understand, Brade," he said. "Goodnight."

On Grant Avenue there was only one saloon. The rest of the buildings housed stores, offices and homes. There were no cheap girls, no loafers. At the far end lay the Ferguson town house, neat and white-painted. The Fergusons had always been "people," something that the Tylers never had been.

Anger and confusion gnawed at Brett as he stopped momentarily on a corner. Where did he belong? Had he come home to something he belonged to or should he have followed the girl's advice and stayed on the train?

SHRUGGING, he walked on, crossing the wide street to Grant Hotel. Grant Street and the hotel had always been the stronghold of the Ferguson element of the town. Entering the lobby, he saw his bags at the desk.

The clerk looked up at him in consternation. "You sure you want a room here, Mr. Tyler?"

"Why not?"

A hand touched Brett's elbow lightly. A handsome, hard-faced man with a sheriff's star was facing him. Like Ringo Billy, he was no mincer of words.

"I'm Jason Saunders," he said curtly. "I suggest you look for a room elsewhere."

"Why?"

"There's an unwritten agreement here in Ferguson that the Tylers and their crowd keep to their own side of town. A different type, shall we say, keep to this part. We want no trouble."

Antagonism rose in Brett. He said, "I'm mainly interested in a room and some sleep. I've come a long way. I have no agreements, written or unwritten, with anyone." He turned back to the clerk. "My key, please."

The clerk gave him one.

When he had washed up, in his room, Brett returned downstairs to eat a lonely meal in the corner of the dining room. Afterward he had an equally lonely drink at the bar. There was no sign of Saunders, but the respectable looking crowd at the hotel bar watched Brett with curious apprehension.

Strolling outside the hotel, he saw the boy who had transported his bags. No one else was within earshot. "You want to earn a couple of dollars, son?" Brett asked.

The boy came forward.

"Get a horse, ride out to the Tyler ranch and tell Con Tyler his brother is at Grant Hotel, in Number Seven." He added, after a moment, "And don't mention your errand to anyone on your way."

He went upstairs then, kicked off his boots and lay down on the bed in the dark, trying to straighten out his impressions of this home coming. Billy, Brade and Ackerman were running true to type. But how about Con? What was Con like? Sleep overcame him as he again saw Sheila Ferguson and heard her say: "Don't get off the train. . . ."

It was past midnight when a sharp knock jerked him upright in the bed. He reached with long-trained instinct for his gun. He placed himself near the door and removed the chair from under the knob.

"Yes?"

"Brett?" Con's voice had not changed at all.

As Brett flicked a match and lit the lamp he thought for a moment that his father had entered the room. His brother was tall and heavy-shouldered, the harsh mouth had his father's sardonic ambition and the black eyes blazed commandingly. He looked more prosperous and confident than in the old days. He measured his younger brother, interest growing in his eyes.

The two wasted no time on handshaking, Con merely said, "You are looking well, Brett." and sat down in the room's only easy chair. "So you came back, eh?"

Brett sat down on the edge of the bed and lit a smoke. "A man has to come back sometime."

Con Tyler kept trying to recognize him, to see him as a brother, and was failing at it. He had walked into the room of a stranger; the kid he had chased off the ranch years ago was gone. The seasoned man was an unknown quantity to him. He said, "Sometimes he's better off staying away, maybe. But then you did get my letters after all?"

Brett looked up in surprise. "Your letters? I never got any. What could you have to write me?"

Con hesitated, a sudden new interest in his eyes as he studied Brett. "I changed my mind. I wrote you three times suggesting you come back. Got an address from a man who had run into you. Why did you come back then?"

"Why did you write me to come?"

Con answered with a counter-question, "How does the town look to you?"

Brett said with acid humor, "You still look like a bunch of rustlers to me. Main Street is a pigsty."

Con Tyler gave a little grunt. "The politics was Brade's idea. That's *his* game. The town I can clean up when I've got what I want, later. Right now, it means votes. After this election *I'll* appoint the sheriffs."

"A noble aim," Brett said. "I suppose Ringo Billy will be your first choice."

"Billy is all right in his place," Con said. "Maybe not for sheriff. After you left, we made so much money selling cattle that we began buying it instead of rustling it. I bought land, too. I own more cattle and more land around here than anyone else." Con Tyler had let his brother's sarcasm pass; ambition was shining in his dark eyes.

"And what does that make you?" Brett asked. "I remember Ringo Billy sitting at the head of the table. I remember that."

"You've got a good memory." Con looked sharply at him.

Brett said again, "Why did you send for me?"

The big man pulled on his cigarette. His face was hard, yet Brett suddenly saw a great loneliness in his eyes. There seemed a string of empty years condensed in that look. "You're close kin, Brett. You're close kin."

It made a little silence, then Con went on, "But you haven't told me yet why you came back."

"Why did I come back? Something pulled me, I guess. It may have to do with the old man making you send me away when hombres like this Billy came into the camp. Maybe you wouldn't understand."

"Maybe I would," Con said. "But Ringo and Brade we can still ride herd on. Let me tell you one thing: I hear you've had a run-in with Billy already; they tell me you were friendly with the Fergusons at the station. That's not smart. Make sure of this: Don't stay in town and get into Billy's or Brade's hair. Don't barge in and be a joker in the deck. I want this election won. Is that clear?"

His manner had suddenly changed. He was giving orders.

Brett said, "And when it's won, and the Tylers suddenly become respectable, that washes the blood off their hands."

"There's always blood on both sides," Con said sharply. "Don't forget that." He added, "Maybe I was wrong. It could be that you wouldn't fit in here. Tell me—"

He never finished. Brett was sitting in the darkest part of the room; Con being between him and the window. Brett reached out of a sudden and turned down the lampwick as he clawed for his gun with the other hand.

"Duck, Con, duck!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Bullets for the Back

A CRASH rattled the room, the sharp tinkle of glass filling the echo of the shot. Brett was on his feet, shoving his brother out of the way. He sprang to the window, leaned out and saw a man swing off the wooden awning. Brett fired—and missed.

He turned swiftly back into the room and relit the lamp. He found Con sitting on the floor against the wall opposite the bed, slumped against a chair. "Con," he called. "Con, are you all right?" He knelt down and shook his brother.

Con Tyler opened his eyes, blinked. "Got me in the side. . . ."

There was a hubbub of voices in the corridor outside.

"Brett," Con said with difficulty. "Go on

out there and act innocent. Ask who was shooting . . . I . . . I don't want to be found in this damned hotel . . . I have my reasons." His voice trailed off. "Go on. . . ."

Brett went out then, in his stocking feet, and pretended to be hitching his belt. Three men were talking under the hall lamp; the clerk was there in his night shirt. "What was that shooting?" Brett demanded.

They looked wide-eyed at him. "Sounded like somewhere on this floor," one of the men said.

"It woke me up," Brett said.

They milled around for a while and eventually Brett was able to return to his room. Con was still on the floor, out cold. Examination showed a bullet channel between two ribs at heart level, under the arm. Blood kept spreading. Brett found clean linen in his bag and a bottle of whiskey. The whiskey —and a lot of cold water—brought Con to on the bed. He sat up with some difficulty.

"Take it easy," said Brett. "Who do you think it was?"

"Let me have that bottle," Con mumbled.

Brett said, "Would any of the Ferguson crowd be stupid enough to pull a stunt like this? Did anyone see you come in here?"

"That's hard to say," Con said. "I came in through the back door and the kitchen. Wish to hell you'd stayed out of this town and this hotel anyway. Makes me look like a fool coming here. Now I got to get out. . . ."

Con Tyler sat for a couple of minutes, then pulled hard on the bottle again and got slowly to his feet. "Go on out in the hall and turn down the lamp."

Brett went out and turned down the lamp. A moment later Con swung out of the room and walked swiftly, though not too steadily, to the back stairs.

"Come down and give me a hand-up," he said.

They reached the back-yard without trouble and walked through lanes and alleys. Behind a wagonshed, near a clump of bushes, Con's horse stood waiting. Con Tyler stood gathering strength for a moment before he put his foot in Brett's hands.

"Sure you can make it?"

"Hell, yes."

Brett stared up at the tall figure. "Who do you think did this?" he asked once more.

He felt the other's stare on him in the dark. "Quien sabe?" Then Con said something strange. "Maybe it's a good thing you came back after all, Brett. Who knows? Come on out to the ranch some time tomorrow."

"You feel all right?" Brett asked.

"Don't worry." Con began wheeling the horse away. "Funny," he said in a peculiar tone, "last time I was in that damned hotel, four years ago, I shot Bruce Overton, one of Jim Ferguson's foremen. He called me a thief to my teeth and I had it out with him."

"Killed him?" Brett asked.

"Yep."

A moment later the sound of Con Tyler's departure had died in the night.

Brett stood for a while in deep thought. He was thinking of the glance Brade and Ackerman had exchanged earlier when he had asked how Con was; and he was remembering the sudden look of loneliness that had come over Con back in the hotel room, and his brother's words: "The town I can always clean up; when I've got what I want. . . ."

AFTER breakfast the next morning he walked to the livery a block from the hotel and let the hostler put his saddle on a black gelding. The horse was stable-frisky and danced wildly under him as he turned down the street.

Outside the picket fence of the Ferguson place he reined in and saw Sheila Ferguson appear on the gallery in riding costume. A hand was coming out of the stable leading a horse across the yard. On sudden impulse Brett swung in through the yard gate, rode up to the house and dismounted. The girl stopped short at the sight of him.

"I see you're going riding," he said. "May I have the pleasure?"

She was trying to recover from her surprise. "I'm expecting Mr. Saunders."

"You said you'd like to see a Tyler call on you. I took you at your word."

She colored a little. "Maybe that's not quite fair."

She looked even more beautiful this morning than on the train. His pulse quickened. "Sometimes all is fair."

"You're a bold man, Mr. Tyler," she said, suddenly meeting his glance.

"I'm afraid Mr. Saunders will be late," said Brett. "He may be busy with his duties." Riding out of the livery he had seen the sheriff and a deputy enter the hotel, probably to investigate the night's shooting. "Anyone who keeps you waiting deserves no consideration."

"You certainly don't believe in losing time, do you?"

"Time waits for no one," he said and took her mount from the hired hand. "How about a little canter?" He held out his hand.

There was still no sign of the sheriff. With sudden decision she came down the steps, took the rein from him and put her foot in his proffered hand. In another second he had lifted her gracefully into the saddle.

Both mounted and were swinging away from the house rail when the front door opened and whitehaired Jim Ferguson came out.

"Sheila!" he called sharply. "You're not going riding with a Tyler!"

"And why not?" the girl demanded.

"I think that's obvious."

"Mr. Tyler is a stranger here," she said with a shrug, showing no indication of heeding the old man.

"His name is not strange," the old man said.

"Mr. Ferguson," Brett said. "I have no interest in this election beyond hoping the best man wins." And he swung his mount around to follow Sheila, who had already started for the gate.

They turned up Front Street and headed out of town. He admired her bearing in the saddle; she rode as gracefully as she walked.

"I see you're not the order-taking kind," he said. "I hope I didn't get you in wrong with your uncle. This *will*, of course, look confusing to the voters."

"You're a contrary nature yourself. I told you not to get off the train, and here you are."

He chuckled. "It took me ten years to get off that train; you couldn't have stopped me. You threw stones at me across the fence back there ten years ago. Maybe that's partly why I'm here."

"You have a long memory," she said.

"Some things a man doesn't forget," he said darkly.

"Let's not get serious," she said suddenly and let her horse go into a short gallop.

They had been riding for almost an hour when she, walking her horse, said, "You're not like the rest of the Tylers. What made you leave home when you were fifteen?"

He told her briefly of his father's death and of Brade bringing in Ringo Billy. She said, "I'm surprised at your father and Con having it in them to send you away. Ringo has been a blotch on the name of Tanner Valley ever since. My dad was killed that night too."

It made a silence between them which he could find no words to bridge. They rode on for a while and he was about to suggest turning around when she spoke again.

"Suppose the Tylers win the election; what will you do?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet."

"What side will you be on?"

He considered for a moment, holding her glance. "My own," he said.

She shook her head briefly. "You can't be an outsider. You'll have to go away or stick with your own kin; there is too much—"

She did not finish the sentence, but with a queer resentment said, "You're a Tyler; a Tyler will always be a Tyler."

She was suddenly the little girl behind the fence who threw stones and called hatefully, "Dirty Tyler; you shot my dad!"

His pulses were vibrating and he felt his face go taut. "Then why did you come riding with me?"

She spurred her horse ahead. "I told you, because I'm contrary. I don't like to have people tell me what to do or not to do. Maybe just for amusement."

She was going fast now, and he roweled the black after her. "I'll race you to the next ridge," she called.

They were on another grass bench with some cottonwoods beyond. She was still running away, but he used the spurs more harshly and began gaining eventually as the country sloped upward. He saw her horse get winded. She went through the woods and out on the other side, crossing a small stream. On the level beyond that he caught her and touched her bridle rein.

They leaned back in their saddles while their horses puffed at a slow walk. When the animals had cooled off she said, "Let's give them a rest," and slid out of the saddle. He followed suit.

"I caught up," he said suddenly and took her in his arms. He pressed his lips down on hers and felt her respond for several seconds before she fought back. Lightning flashed in her eyes when he let her go. He said, "I've wanted to do this ever since I saw you in the train."

She tried to laugh it off, but her eyes were bewildered.

CHAPTER SIX

Wrong Dead Man?

WHEN he took her in his arms again she fought less; eventually she kissed him back. After a while she said, "No good will ever come of this; there's too much blood between us. Let's ride back."

His mind was in a turmoil. He could find nothing to say as he helped her into the saddle. When they detoured down a small slope and the trail led through some brush growth, Sheila Ferguson's sorrel suddenly shied off the path with an excited whinny. In the deep grass just off the trail the hat and boot tops of a man showed.

Brett knelt down and opened Con's shirt. The temporary bandage was dark and solid with dried blood; there was no heartbeat, no other wound.

"Bullet must have hit his lung after all, or lamed his heart," said Brett, speaking to himself. "He rolled right out of the saddle here and his horse went on."

He looked up at the girl, who sat pale and shaky in the saddle, and told her of the night's happenings. "It's a strange homecoming all right; I wonder what Con Tyler really was like. . . ."

"He lived by the gun," she said. "And he was hard as nails. But I don't think he ever

was as bad as Brade or Ringo Billy. At least he was known for calling his shots, cattle thief or not."

"You think any of your crowd did this?"

"Just before election? Wouldn't that be stupid?"

"But in Grant Hotel! A lot of people would believe anything they please." Brett stood in deep thought for a long moment. Then: "You better ride on home. I have things to attend to."

She was wheeling away when he took her bridle. "Will I see you again?"

"Quien sabe?" she said thoughtfully. "There's no telling what will happen now." And she rode off.

Only a few people saw him bring Con's body into Remsen's undertaking establishment on Grant Street some time later, on a wagon borrowed from a nearby rancher. He returned the black to the livery and made his way to Main Street.

He walked through the big front room at Ackerman's, asked for his cousin, and eventually was shown to a back room where Brade Tyler was having lunch alone. Brett stood for a while inside the door, considering the heavy man.

Brade looked up. "Well, Brett, I hope you're here to say goodbye, and no hard feelings. Be smart to take my advice. Work out best that way. My offer of that little stake still stands."

"Con," Brett said, watching his cousin's face intently, "is down at Remsen's, being laid out for burial."

Brade Tyler went paper-white and his lips and heavy cheeks began to tremble. "What—what was that again? What did you say?"

"You heard me," Brett said and saw Brade trying to crowd the guilt from his face.

"Somebody made a bum play, Brade. Looks to me like they killed the wrong man."

Brade labored to his feet. "What you mean by that? Who made a bum play? Say it!"

"Whoever was out to get me, Brade." He suddenly shoved the other violently into the chair. "Sit there a while," he said. "I want you to think about it. Think hard."

He backed out of the door and saw Brade slumped in the chair. Outside, Brett went to the bar and asked for Ackerman, but at that moment Ackerman came out of his office at the other end of the bar.

"I want to talk to you," Brett said.

Ackerman took him into a richly furnished office. "Con is dead," Brett said quickly. "He was shot in the back last night at Grant Hotel."

"That's terrible," Ackerman said, watching Brett. "Terrible. But how? At Grant Hotel?"

He leaned on the desk, shaking his head as if he could not quite grasp the news. "What are we going to do without Con? What are we going to do? It's a terrible loss!" He smacked his fist into his palm. "But we'll get even with them for that! We'll settle those high-riding Fergusons, once and for all."

He stopped and looked up at Brett with a new light in his face, "Do you realize what this means? It clinches the election! By God, it does that." He hit his palm again. "They killed him in Grant Hotel. Nobody but the Ferguson crowd goes there."

He made a move toward the door. "Does Brade know about this?"

Brett placed himself against the doorknob. "Brade knows," he said significantly, his glance level, "I'm looking for Billy. Where is Ringo Billy?"

"Billy? What do you want with Billy?"

"Brade confessed," Brett said then. "I knew well enough that Billy was sent to get me, and got Con instead. It would have worked pretty well at that, wouldn't it? I get killed in Grant Hotel after being warned by Sheriff Saunders and the clerk not to stay there. That *would* have clinched the election and got rid of me. Two birds with one stone, eh? Where is Billy?"

"Now, wait a minute," Ackerman began. "You're talking crazy! Brade confessed nothing." He began fingering his coat lapel.

Brett put his hand on his gun. "Ask Brade," he said. "And keep your hands still. Now tell me, where is Billy."

The man was shaking visibly now.

"Where is Billy?" Brett demanded again.

Ackerman gasped. "At the ranch, as far's I know. But I tell you, you're wrong!"

BRETT backed out of the office then, having played his second hole card. He stopped momentarily at the bar. "Brade tells me Ringo Billy killed my brother Con last night at Grant Hotel. Tell Billy I'm looking for him," he told the first bartender.

The man tried to keep a noncommittal face, but did not quite succeed. Not waiting for any

INSURE YOUR COUNTRY'S FUTURE
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answer Brett hastily turned out into the street. He repeated the same remark to the first man he met, and walked on. He spoke in this manner to three men and a boy, leaving each of them to stare open-mouthed after him.

There seemed to be a subtle stir over the town by the time he reached Grant Hotel. As he was about to enter the lobby, Jason Saunders and a deputy met him. The sheriff's anger over Brett's ride with Sheila Ferguson was ill-concealed, though he tried not to parade his jealousy as he measured Brett. "I'll take your gun," he said.

Brett stopped and raised a warning hand. "Not so fast."

"You're under arrest for questioning about the shooting in your room last night. Con Tyler is dead."

"I know that," Brett said flatly.

Saunders' voice was even despite his anger. "If you think you can plant a thing like this on our side of town, you're making a mistake. I warned you against coming here. You wouldn't listen. Now hand over your gun. I mean to get to the bottom of this."

"You never will," Brett said tensely, "if you keep jumping to conclusions. Con Tyler was my brother. As for my gun, you'll have to come and take it if you want it."

It stumped the man for a moment; he glanced at his deputy. Brett had backed away a little and stood waiting for them to make a move. "All right," said Saunders then, gritting his teeth, his eyes going steely. "Let's get that gun!"

"You're making a fool play," Brett said, tensing his hand, realizing that he would have to put these two out of action without seriously harming them.

At this moment three shots rent the noon stillness of the town. It came from the direction of Main Street and Ackerman's. As the three men turned slightly, their tension momentarily broken, a fourth shot sounded.

"Gentlemen," Brett said. "I'll be back to settle this question with you later. I have an account to straighten out elsewhere." And he turned his back on the two men and began walking in the direction of Ackerman's before they could answer.

He had walked two blocks when he realized that the streets were clear and the town was watching him. He had a sensation of being followed at a distance by Saunders and the deputy, but he paid them no heed.

As he swung into Main Street the boy who had run his errands for him the night before, came panting down the boardwalk on the other side. Seeing Brett, he darted to the middle of the dusty street, his eyes dilated with fear.

"Ringo Billy's looking for you, mister," he called, and darted up an alley.

Brett continued cautiously up the boardwalk opposite Ackerman's, listening to his own footfalls against the boards. There was a sudden creak and slap of swing doors and the outlaw was revealed in the main door of the gambling house, a pistol in each hand. He lurched forward, scanning the street.

Brett, half a block away, stepped out under the wooden awning and called, "Here, Ringo!" and fired at the same time, knocking the gun out of the other's left hand.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wind-Up

WITH an oath, the outlaw jumped sideways and fired his right-hand weapon. The bullet went wide and Brett's next shot took him by the left shoulder and spun him against an awning post. Immediately Ringo went to his knee behind the post, steadying himself as he threw down for his second shot. Brett's third shot took the post and he kept walking.

Brett stopped, took slow aim and threw down, plowing his next slug into Ringo's upper arm. The pistol sagged but the man, pale with strain and anger, clutched the weapon with both hands and raised it again, embracing the post.

"Give up, Billy?" Brett called harshly.

The answer was a shot that scorched Brett's ribs. He fired then twice, his bullets taking Ringo Billy in the right chest. The man rolled from behind the post and lay still on the walk; and suddenly Brett was conscious of the fact that he had always known he would down Ringo Billy.

He backed in under the awning on the other side of the street then and reloaded. A quick glance showed him Saunders and the deputy standing half a block away, their guns drawn, covering him. When he had reloaded he crossed at the corner and made his way to where Billy lay. The outlaw was still breathing. He looked up and cursed softly at Brett.

". . . should . . . should have kilt . . . you when you knocked the . . . bott . . . bottle from Clant Wickam's . . ha. . . ." He was suddenly still.

Brett hooked a finger in the left swing door and pulled it open. The big room inside was empty. Only the head bartender stood behind the mahogany, stiffly and mechanically polishing a glass over and over again, his face pale, sweat on his forehead in big beads.

A little to one side, Brett saw, as he slowly walked into the place, Brade Tyler sitting against the bar, leaning on the foot rail on one elbow. There was a hole in the middle of his forehead and two red round spots on his shirt. His own gun had fired only once. It lay at his limp fingertips in the sawdust.

"Where's Ackerman?" Brett demanded of

the bartender who still was polishing that glass.

"I'm only tending bar here," the man said. "That's all I do."

Brett moved over and cautiously kicked Lew's office door open. The place was vacant, a small safe open and empty, papers scattered over the desk. A backdoor was open as if someone had made a hurried departure.

Brett went back and took the glass from the bartender and made the man hand him a bottle. He poured three fingers of rye.

He fondled the jigger glass, feeling lonely and at loose ends. A crowd collected gradually. Saunders and two deputies showed up, and he saw old Jim Ferguson. Stonily and with deliberation Brett explained his position to the sheriff. He felt empty. He had not taken sides. He had only reacted to the things that had happened to him. Sadness at the loss of Con weighed on him. He would have liked to have known Con better.

"When I told Ackerman that Brade had confessed to sending Billy to get me at the hotel," he said, "it apparently worked. Billy hearing it, fell for it and killed Brade. . . ."

"That's right," said the bartender suddenly. "I saw it. I was standing right here polishing a glass."

So this was his home town, and his kin was gone and the election was lost for the Tylers, and yet Brett felt he belonged on no side. He felt no friendliness toward the Fergusons. Perhaps he might as well move on. And why had he come? There was no one to whom he could explain that it had to do with the smell of apple pie; with a small boy and a dog playing in an orchard behind the house; an orchard his mother had made his father plant; and with the memory of his mother sitting at the head of the table at the old ranch house; and of Ringo Billy sitting at that same table; and a little girl behind a fence calling out, "Dirty Tyler." It all made a pattern that he never could have changed; he had always known that he would come back. But only he could grasp it.

He was meeting old Jim Ferguson's hard glance as he was ready to leave. "Well, I guess that finishes politics for the Tylers," he said. "And maybe that's as well. There was a Tyler once, though, who was president of the United States. . . ." And he thought he saw a glimpse of understanding in the old man's eyes as he stepped across Brade Tyler's boots and went out.

Much later he happened to cross the lobby of Grant Hotel, his thoughts heavy on him, when a voice stopped him. He turned slowly and faced Sheila Ferguson. The willful haughtiness was gone from her face; her eyes regarded him with something like concern.

"Where to now?" she said. "What are you going to do?"

He shrugged and straightened up. *"Quien sabe.* . . . Maybe I'll go out and see a home ranch I haven't seen in many years. As you say, I'm a Tyler, and I guess a Tyler I'll always be. . . ." He bowed slightly and was about to move on.

Her voice halted him again; it was trembling just a little bit but there was no mockery in it this time. "I'd like to see a Tyler call on me sometime," she said.

THE END

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BOSS OF THE GHOST HERD

Vigorous Southwest Action Novel

By Walt Coburn

Big Hunk, the biggest, toughest hunk of man on the Border, bought a herd of Mexican cattle—and with it . . . the curse of a Rio hell-night.

10 STORY WESTERN 15c MAGAZINE

Also novelettes and shorts by John Jo Carpenter, James Shaffer, Thomas Thompson, Gunnison Steele, Giff Cheshire and others in the September issue . . . On sale—August 9th.

By HARRY VAN DEMARK

OF ALL the counties in Texas, back in 1877, Kimble was probably the most notorious rendezvous for outlaws and criminals. Kimble County, bordering both the North and South Llano rivers, was covered with plenty of mesquite timber in which to hide.

It was into this nest of evil that Texas Ranger Lieutenant N. O. Reynolds, commanding Ranger Company E, was sent to apprehend law offenders and to generally preserve order.

Old Jimmy Dublin lived up on the South Llano, where he had raised a large family, mostly boys. Some years before the advent of the Rangers, Dick Dublin, and a pal of his, Ace Lankford, had killed two men in a country store at Lankford's Cove, Coryell County.

A reward of five hundred dollars was offered by the State for the arrest and conviction of Dick Dublin. To this the county of Coryell had added two hundred dollars. To avoid the clutches of the law Dublin and Lankford had fled westward.

Not long after this Dell, another of old Jimmy Dublin's boys, killed a neighbor, Jim Williams. Thus at the time of the Rangers arrival in Kimble County, two of the Dublin boys were trying to beat a murder rap. They were reported to be hiding near their father's home.

placed in charge of a squad to take Dell Dublin and several other prisoners to the Llano County lock-up, there being no jail worthy of the name in Kimble County.

When Dick Dublin learned that Gillett, with the Bannister boys, John and Will, were with Lieutenant Reynolds' company and hot on his trail, his mind went back to the time the three Rangers were beardless boys with Joe Frank's cow outfit, and he had threatened to whip them with his quirt the first time he caught up with them. He respected the odds against him in the present instance, however.

Texas Rangers finally came to the end of that "rocky road to Dublin," and found they had fired a small fortune out of their guns—into the body of an owlhooter who sure couldn't spend it!

In addition to the Dublin boys, Lieutenant Reynolds knew that Bill Allison, Starke Reynolds (not related to the lieutenant) and a horde of bandits, cattle thieves and murderers were hiding within the county lines.

Reynolds, with his Rangers, reached his destination in October, 1877, and made camp on the North Llano River. As soon as they were comfortably settled for the winter, Reynolds sent men out to scout the surrounding country. The first haul delivered only minor offenders.

Then they raided Luke Stone's ranch about ten miles from camp and captured Dell Dublin, who went into a fit of rage when he discovered that escape was impossible. In sheer bravado he tore his shirt open at the bosom and dared the Rangers to shoot him.

While Dell was being disarmed, Dick Dublin rode out of the brush and came within gunshot of the ranch before he discovered the Rangers. Reynolds men pursued him for several miles, but he got away.

Ranger Corporal James B. Gillett was

Soon after this the sheriff of Tom Green County rode into the Ranger camp. He was on the trail of a bunch of cattle that had been stolen near San Angelo. Lieutenant Reynolds detailed Sergeant Nevill and several Rangers to help the sheriff apprehend the thieves. The trail led over on the South Llano and eventually the cattle were recovered.

While scouting on the edge of the herd, Sergeant Nevill saw a man riding down the trail in his direction. He hid out with his men and awaited the stranger's approach. It was getting dark by this time and when the newcomer had reached a spot opposite the Rangers' hiding place, they rose up, presented their guns and Nevill called out:

"Halt! And throw your hands in the air!"

"Like hell I will!" exclaimed the rider. He turned his horse and disappeared into a cedar brake. A shower of Ranger bullets followed the fugitive but failed to halt him. One of the Rangers recognized the rider as Dick Dublin, a man with seven hundred dollars reward on his head.

DUBLIN— LONE STAR HELLER!

ON A cold January morning, Corporal Gillett, with Privates John and Will Bannister, Tom Gillespie, Dave Ligon and Ben Carter, was ordered to make ready for a five-day scouting expedition. Before the detail left, Corporal Gillett walked over to where Lieutenant Reynolds sat on a stool before his tent, saluted and asked for orders.

Reynolds said seriously, "Corporal, this is a scout after Dick Dublin again. He seems to have been a regular Jonah to this company. He lives only ten miles from here and yet we have been unable to effect his capture. I consider this a reflection on every member of Company E. If we can't capture him, at least let's make life so miserable for him that he'll depart for other climes."

Shortly after leaving camp Gillett and his men left the road and traveled south to the head of Pack Saddle Creek. Later they arrived at a ranch owned by a man named Potter, but found nobody home. They passed on into the cedar brake without having been seen.

Gillett had learned that some cattlemen had built a large stock pen on the extreme headwaters of the Llano and were using it to confine wild cattle. The pen was nearly sixty miles from the Ranger camp. The corporal thought possibly Dick Dublin might be hanging around there and led his men in that direction. But the pen was deserted. The cattlemen had apparently moved.

The Rangers had been out two days when Gillett reluctantly gave the order to turn back. Twenty-five miles were covered on the third day without a sign of a human being. Gillett still had the Potter ranch in mind, so he timed himself to reach the ranch after darkness had fallen on the fourth day.

Here lived old Joe Potter, known to be a friend and neighbor of the Dublins. With him were his two grown sons.

At sundown the Rangers were within a mile of the Potter cabin. They unsaddled their horses and prepared to approach the place on foot. If the effort failed, they were to camp there for the night. John Bannister and Ligon were left to guard the horses, while Gillespie, Will Bannister and Ben Carter went along with Gillett.

They had proceeded only a short distance when they saw a lone rider coming slowly down the trail to the ranch. They remained hidden and were able to approach within fifty yards of the cabin without being discovered.

They halted in the bed of a small creek for a final consultation. The one-room cabin had but a single door. In front of the cabin was a small wagon. To the right, about twenty-five steps away, Potter and his boys were unloading some hogs from another wagon into a pen.

The Rangers knew the minute they left the creek bed they would be in full view of the Potters. But Gillett figured that if they advanced on the run they would stand a good chance of capturing the lone rider who was just approaching the cabin. Gillett gave the nod and the Rangers moved.

Old Man Potter discovered them as they knew he would. He immediately shouted a warning:

"Run, Dick! Here comes the Rangers!"

The Rangers realized then that their great moment was at hand. The man they had seen riding toward the ranch was Dick Dublin!

They were so close to Dublin that he had no time to mount his horse or get his gun, so he tore out madly for the brush, Gillett called out to him to halt and surrender, but he kept going. The corporal fired a shot directly at the fleeing man, but it missed its mark and in another moment the outlaw was out of sight.

Gillett hurried in pursuit and finally saw Dublin running up a litle ravine. The corporal stopped, drew bead, again called a command to halt. As he ran Dublin made a movement as if to draw a pistol. Gillett fired. His bullet struck the fleeing man in the small of the back, just over the right hip-bone and passed out near his collarbone. The fleeing man was bending over as he ran which accounted for the unusual course of the bullet.

Dick Dublin sank to the ground. Ranger Ben Carter, in the excitement, fired two shots at the fallen man.

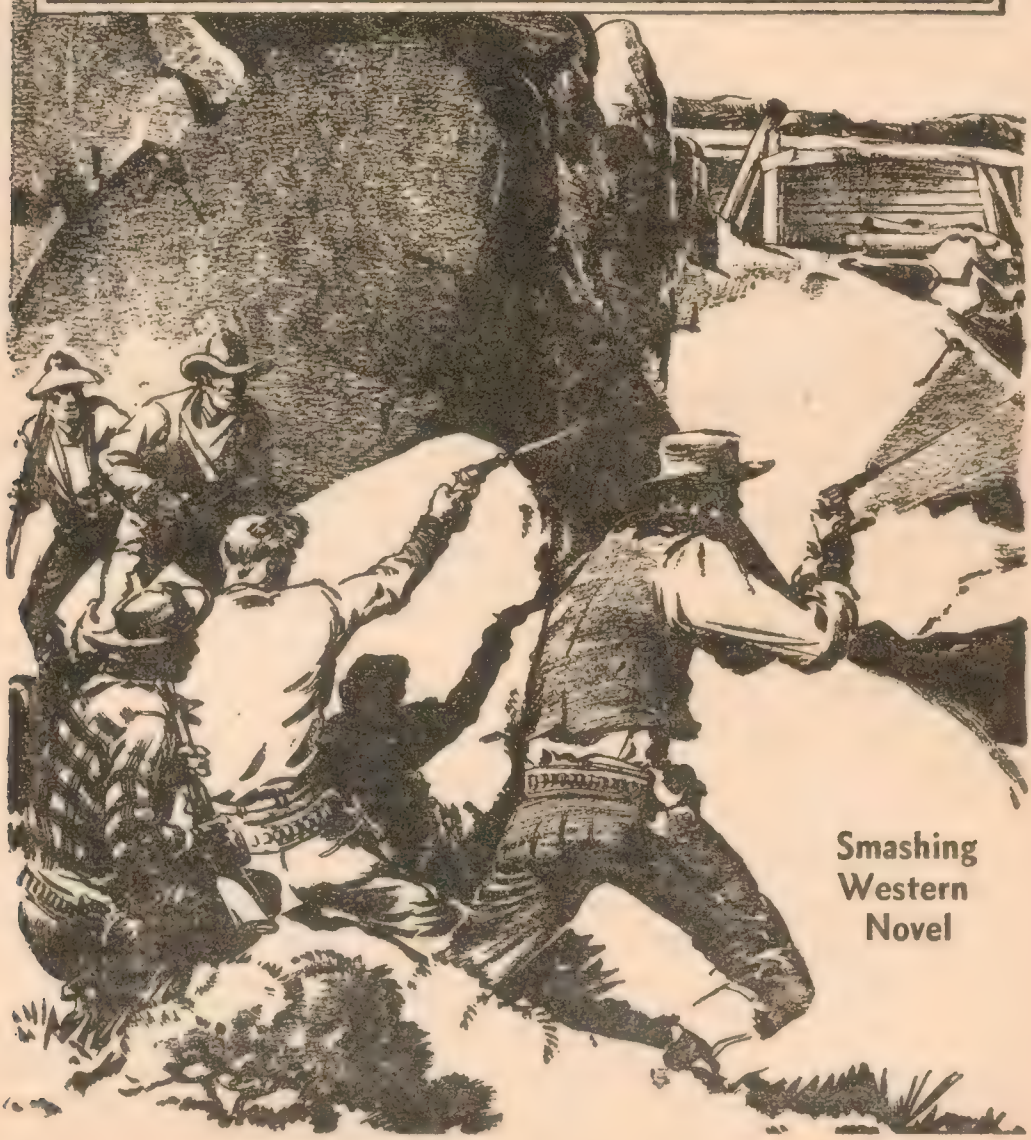
When they reached Dublin he was dead. He was unarmed, but the belt around his waist was full of cartridges.

The Rangers' enthusiasm over the death of the outlaw was short lived. When they arrived back at the Ranger camp they learned that the reward had been offered only for Dublin's arrest and conviction.

The killing caused plenty of excitement in Kimble County, and the Dublin boys, Dell and Role, swore vengeance against Corporal Gillett and the Bannisters. But nothing ever came of the oath.

DEADLINE TIME AT DAMNATION DAM

By THOMAS THOMPSON



Smashing Western Novel

Four big kings on a green baize table got Windy McCloud ten thousand disappearing dollars, which bought him his share in a quick-death, land-grab war. That was just enough to make Windy try to tame boot-tough San Fernando Valley, win back his lost fortune—and then slip on the brink of a back-shooting tinhorn's man-made hell!

Tracey was making a run toward the base of the dam.

CHAPTER ONE

Chips, Fists—and Bullets!

IF THINGS had gone as planned, the town of Calabasas would have been just another wide spot in the long road and Windy McCloud would have been at the Rancho of the late Carlos Alvarez, talking to old Dona, the widow. Perhaps he would have been sampling a little of the San Fernando Valley wine that Carlos used to brag about. But things did not go as planned.

They seldom did, with the lanky Pecos-born drifter, whose addiction to conversation and unpredictable shifting around had given him his name.

In the first place, the interior of the saloon was so cool after the long hot ride through the valley. In the second place, there was Cord Vanery. He was a real estate promoter who seemed to be some potatoes here in Calabasas, and he strutted around as if he were the only man in Southern California who had a dime. It was pretty hard for Windy to keep from mentioning the hundred dollars he had in his own levis—for it was an unusual condition and one worth talking about. So finaly he did mention it.

After that, he mentioned to this same Cord Vanery that he played a hand or two of poker now and then. Now, six hours later, Windy McCloud had forgotten all about his visit to the widow of his late friend, Carlos Alvarez. He was too busy. And he was glad, incidentally, that he had mentioned poker to Vanery, for as a poker player Vanery was fast proving himself a good land promoter.

To Windy, the world was good, and it was getting better with every hand. Out on the dry floor of the valley the yellow mustard stood higher than a man on horseback, and here on the table in front of him the yellow gold seemed trying to match that height. Windy laid down four Kings. He saw the sour look creep into Cord Vanery's eyes, but he paid little attention to it. When a man had lost ten thousand dollars at one sitting he could be expected to look sour. The lanky Texan raked in the bloated pot and sighed contentedly. It was one of those things. Lady Luck had decided to cuddle up to him, and Windy had sense enough to keep his arm tight around her waist. He nodded to the bartender to bring over another bottle.

The other two men at the table were sheepmen. They had played it light and were only out a few hundred. They got up now, made their excuses before leaving, then went out together, shaking their heads and making remarks about how cards sometimes ran.

Windy liked them. They knew how to lose. He picked up the cards and started to deal out a hand for himself and Vanery.

Vanery jushed the cards toward the middle of the table. "Did I ask for a hand?" he said softly.

Windy hesitated. For the last three rounds he had felt the rebellion building up in Cord Vanery. Now he took time to appraise the man. Vanery was handsome, in a dudish sort of way. Checkered vest, crossed by a heavy gold chain; black shoestring tie with the loose ends exactly even; imitation flower in the buttonhole of his broadcloth coat. But he had eyes that had none of the free talking real estate man in them. They were pit black and had a smoldering look in them. And although he strutted and bragged, when it came to a case of put up or shut up, Cord Vanery had put up and the ten thousand he had lost didn't seem to mean too much to him. Rather, Windy got the feeling it was the losing itself that was rankling the man.

Windy grinned across the table. "It's for you to say about another hand, Mr. Vanery."

"Sometimes a man's luck is too good to be reasonable," Cord Vanery said, and Windy didn't like the way he said it.

"You wouldn't mean that sometimes a man can make his luck run the the way he wants, would you?" Windy asked.

Cord Vanery pushed his chair back from the table and got to his feet. His coal black eyes centered on Windy's face and did not waver. "No," he said slowly, "I wouldn't mean that. I think you're crooked, that's all."

VANERY'S voice was soft, easy, self-assured. Windy pushed his hat back on his sparse red hair and felt a sudden tightness in his stomach. Here was a side of Cord Vanery he had not seen. There had been no reason to look for it. Windy wondered where Cord Vanery carried his gun, for no one but a gunman who knew he was good could stand there and make that kind of statement to a stranger who had made no attempt to conceal the well-worn holster and the black butt of the .44 he carried.

Cord Vanery had a look about him that said he was in the habit of talking to anyone in any way he pleased and openly defying anyone to do anything about it. Windy felt that slow anger of his that always took so long to get to the surface. He grinned at Vanery.

"For a gent who cuts such a big patch around here, you sure take your losin' serious," Windy said. "Now, I ain't tryin' to advise you, but if I was you I'd save that talk for the local boys that you can push around. I myself don't like it very much."

He saw a sneering smile on Cord Vanery's lips and then the tail of his eye caught the motion at the bar. Four men had pushed themselves forward. One, a big ox of a man, came up and thrust his sweaty face close to Windy's.

"All right, Texas," the big man said. "Tryin' to start something?"

Windy stepped back against the bar where all the men including Vanery would have to face him. He let his eyes center on the big man with the stale whiskey breath.

The man was thick-set and his stomach hung over his belt and turned back the top of his trousers, exposing his underwear. The stubble of beard on his face did a poor job of concealing a scar that ran from his cheek bone to his chin. His eyes, a watery red, rolled like a mad bull's. He carried a .45 in a low-cut holster.

Windy caught the full smile on Cord Vanery's lips and he realized that the real estate promoter had no intention of letting him get out of town with that ten thousand dollars. The men in front of him gave four good reasons why Cord Vanery was probably right, but Windy had different ideas. He let his hand drift toward his belt and he saw four other hands match his move. He relaxed against the bar and grinned at the men.

"My old daddy used to tell me there was tinhorns like you boys in the country," Windy said softly, "but I never did believe him. Why, back along the Pecos, where I come from, it would take about five minutes to tie knots in the tails of all of you."

"Never mind the talk, Texas," the thick set man said. "We was watchin' the game and we saw you cheatin'. You gonna give Mr. Vanery back his money, or do you want us to call the law?"

Windy had been around enough to know he wanted no part of a small town jail, but he also had no intention of parting with his winnings. The anger had finally risen all the way to the surface now, and Windy felt both calm and talkative, which was a dangerous sign. He sized up the men again, calculated their combined strength. Then, to the big man, he said, "Mr. Big Gut, you're a damn liar. And as far as me giving back the money I won, if you figger you're man enough to take it it's right here in my inside pocket!"

Cord Vanery's men were like Vanery himself in that if they were making a bluff they were perfectly ready to back it up. They closed in with a rush and the big man aimed a blow at Windy's chin that was calculated to take his head off. The lanky Texan ducked and butted his head into the ample middle exposed to him. The big man went down with a grunt, and the other three piled in.

Windy had time to see that Cord Vanery was standing back, unconcerned. There was a smile on his thin lips and he had taken out a knife and was starting to trim his fingernails. The utter confidence of the man rankled Windy to such an extent that he redoubled his efforts. Whipping out his gun he cracked the nearest man over the head.

THROUGH the opening he had created Windy was able to chop his way half way to the door and there he turned, his gun covering the five men. The smile had left Cord Vanery's face. He said, "You better think twice, McCloud. We weren't fooling about the law. We could change the charge from card cheating to armed robbery."

"And I might lose my temper and cut down the bunch of you if you don't get your hand away from that hideout gun, Vanery," Windy said softly. He started backing slowly toward the door. The big man on the floor was sitting up now, gasping his breath, his red eyes rolling. Suddenly he jumped and threw his weight against Windy's legs. In the tangle that followed Windy heard Vanery's voice, cold and confident. "Get him, Hatch!"

Windy felt his gun spin out of his hand as Hatch, the big man, clubbed him across the back of the neck with his ham like fist. Stars started spinning in front of Windy's eyes and he knew that he was up against more than he could handle. He brought his knee up sharply and heard Hatch groan, then Windy McCloud was running, unashamed, toward the door.

One man made a flying leap and Windy took time to smash him on the chin, pick him up bodily and toss him back into Cord Vanery's charging men. Then he was outside, and the world was still spinning as he vaulted into the saddle of his rangy sorrel.

As he churned the dust of the Camino toward Buenaventura, Windy McCloud knew he was not going to make the trip through the Santa Monica hills alone. There were yells, and two shots whined past his head as Vanery and his men hit the leather.

The sorrel had been called upon before to make a quick exit from a strange town, and he did his best now. Stretching out into a long lope, he churned the white dust as Windy cursed his empty holster and tugged at the rifle in the saddle scabbard.

Things had taken a bad turn. . . .

This morning, Windy McCloud had been a saddle bum on his way to pass the time of day with the widow of an old friend. If he had been worried about how that widow was getting along he wouldn't have admitted it. Now, if he were to believe the nearness of those bullets, he had become an unwanted character in the neighborhood of Calabasas. Deciding that was so, he tugged the rifle free and sent a shot back toward the five massed riders that dogged his trail. He saw them split, three heading up a narrow road that wound through a canyon.

Another mile and the reason for that split became clear. A hundred yards ahead the same three riders came out of the brush and blocked his way. Behind him, Cord Vanery and Hatch closed in. Windy reined over hard and forced the sorrel through a gap in a sagging rail fence and as he did he saw Hatch rise in his stirrups, a rifle to his shoulder.

Faintly Windy heard the crack of the gun. But the thing he was most aware of was the sudden lifting of his hat from his head, and the blazing pain, as if someone had poured a tea kettle of hot water down his face. There was a rushing sound in his ears. Time seemed to stop. His hands felt as though they were made of wet rawhide as he groped for the saddle horn. Then the sorrel walked slowly away, so it seemed, and left Windy McCloud sitting in the air. He stayed that way a short time, then fell swiftly, and the hard ground came up to beat him to pieces.

CHAPTER TWO

Another Gun for McCloud

IT WAS nearly dark when McCloud opened his eyes. The dust that clung to the thick matting of wild oats had clogged his nostrils until he was gasping for breath. Blood from the cut on his head formed a caked mass across one cheek and drew tightly when he worked his jaw. Turning his head slowly he saw his horse cropping grass in a grove of live oaks a few feet off the main road. He got to his feet, made his way there, then sat down, completely exhausted, his head swimming.

After what seemed to be hours he managed to get up again. One quick search through his pockets brought back the memory of Cord Vanery and the poker game. There was a lone fifty-cent piece in his jeans.

Despite the rubbery feeling in his legs his first thought was to return to Calabasas and talk with Vanery. Then he thought better of it. Vanery didn't bluff. It would be simple for the promoter to convince the local constable that McCloud was a card sharp and a dangerous character. For the moment, maybe, he had better let well enough alone.

Perhaps he had better just try to find the Alvarez place. Old Dona would cluck over him like a mother hen, fill his stomach with good food and patch up his wounds. She had done it before. He tried to mount his horse, and a great sickness seized him. Crawling back to a nearby oak he fell into a feverish, drugged sleep. . . .

When he awoke the moon was bright and the smell of cured grass, wet with dew, was everyhere. He felt better and somehow there was a familiar sensation within him, like a man who is nearly home after a long absence. Taking stock of his situation, he knew what it was. He was broke, and the throbbing in his head told him he was in trouble. It was a familiar state of affairs to Windy McCloud. Then he heard horses cropping grass and there were worried whispers.

His hand dropped to his empty holster and his eyes bugged from their sockets. He was not as well off as he had imagined. He had died and gone to heaven, for coming into the moonlight was the first angel Windy McCloud had ever seen. The only trouble was, she had a mighty handsome young man with her.

Just as suddenly Windy decided that he wasn't dead, that this girl was real flesh and blood—the prettiest flesh and blood he had seen in a long time. And with that decision Windy moaned. He knew women. They were a lot of trouble, something that tied a man down, but they were nice to have around. They always came and stroked your forehead when you moaned. But this one didn't.

She said, "He's probably just a drunk from town but we can't leave him here. See if you can get him on his horse, Jimmy."

The handsome Jimmy came close, and Windy sat up suddenly. Jimmy jumped back as if he had encountered a snake, and he tugged a small calibre gun from his waistband.

"Don't try anything funny," Jimmy warned, aiming the gun.

"How can I, you jackass?" Windy inquired pleasantly. He didn't like this Jimmy. He wasn't a cowpoke. He wasn't anything. He wore funny pants drawn tight inside of laced boots and he had on a stiff-brimmed hat. And he was much too handsome to be out riding on a moonlight night with a girl as beautiful as this one. But for all that, he seemed to have some sense. He put the gun back in his waist-band.

"What happened to you, stranger?" he asked.

"That is a matter of opinion," Windy said. He wanted to be careful what he said around this girl. He had made a solemn promise to himself that he would have nothing to do with women. They were poison! But that was before he had known that black hair framing a creamy-skinned oval face could be so beautiful. Now, if he were going to get any place with this vision, he knew he must dispel her impression he was a town drunk, so he explained his situation fully, telling her the entire truth.

He omitted only the poker game and Cord Vanery, and insisted he had saved six defenseless women and children from bandits and gotten shot in the process. Then he moaned some more, but the girl still did not stroke his forehead. So he gave it up as a bad job and asked where he might find the ranch of Dona Alvarez. That changed the entire picture.

The girl dropped to her knees beside Windy and, when she found he was an old friend of Carlos Alvarez, she said she was Carmen Alvarez, a niece. And she had heard her late uncle speak of Windy McCloud. So she smiled at him and stroked his forehead. And Windy McCloud made strange sounds in his throat and decided Carmen Alvarez was more beautiful than he had thought. He was glad she was not an angel.

She half lifted Windy to his feet and Windy let his legs sag a little more than was necessary. It was nice. When he swayed close the girl released him suddenly and he had to take three quick steps to keep from falling. But she saw to it that Jimmy Tracey—whom Windy wished would go away—helped him into his saddle, and in a little while he was riding through the moonlight, stirrup to stirrup with Carmen Alvarez. And in that way they came to the gentle slope that lead to the tiny valley screened with sycamores. The music of a creek was in the night air and the pungent tang of wet earth and deep ferns and growing things was everywhere.

They came into the open, then, and there was the long adobe house and a dozen outbuildings. "Welcome to Rancho Los Robles," Carmen Alvarez said, and her voice made music. "I wish Uncle Carlos could be here tonight. In spite of that cut on your head there would be a real fiesta, Windy McCloud."

Jim Tracey grunted and said something about that being the trouble with the late Carlos Alvarez: he spent too much time with

San Fernando Valley wine and fiestas and not enough with his cattle. Windy felt like asking Tracey what the hell he knew about cattle, but he held his tongue and smiled instead. He did not like the possessive way Tracey looked at Carmen. And it was plain to see Jim Tracey did not like the way Windy rolled his eyes, either.

DONA ALVAREZ cried when she first saw Windy. She held him close to her ample bosom and told him over and over how Carlos loved him like a brother and how he always talked of rustler wars in New Mexico where Windy had wiped out twenty *bandidos* single handed. Windy like that part. Good old Carlos had been a man who could dress up a tale. Actually it had only been four *bandidos*, and maybe he did have some help from Carlos himself. But he liked the way the story made Carmen's eyes sparkle.

Jim Tracey snorted and said, "Gun fighter!" in much the same way he might have said "Two-headed monster."

Tia Dona, as Windy had always called her, babbled on in a mixture of English and Spanish lavish with praise of Windy who she in turn called "the very best twin" of Carlos Alvarez, and in spite of her seeming scatterbrained manner she soon had Windy's head bandaged, had him deep in the most comfortable chair in the house, and had a bottle of *vino del pais* in front of him.

Then she sat down, folded her hands in her wide lap and demanded an hour by hour account of what Windy had been doing during the years since Carlos had come to California to inherit the Rancho Los Robles.

As much as Windy McCloud liked to talk he didn't like the way Jim Tracey snorted every time he tried to spruce his adventures up a little. Restricted to straight facts, the way he was, and feeling that there were some things best left unsaid in front of Carmen, he worked the conversation around to the Rancho Los Robles and the affairs of the late Carlos Alvarez.

Carlos Alvarez was perhaps as likeable a man as ever lived, but Windy knew that as the owner of a ranch he had a good collection of shortcomings.

"Tell me about the cattle," Windy urged. "Carlos wrote once that there were over a thousand head of white faces."

Tia Dona held out her hands. "The cows," she said, shrugging. "Pobre Carlos. He looked at the cows and said they were healthy and pretty. They should take care of themselves. He did not do much with the cows except eat some." In way of defense she added, "But they are still here." A sudden idea lighted her face and she leaned forward, beaming.

"You will round up the cows, Windy," she said quickly. "We will sell them all. All except two young ones which we will barbecue in the pit for the fiesta. Windy, my twin, I am so glad you are come. Always you write you will come, but I have give up. Pobre Carlos. He wanted so much to see you before he die. He would have had such a big barbecue for you, his very best twin."

She cried a little then, and Windy put his arm around her shoulder. He caught Jim Tracey shaking his head, a frown on his forehead. Carmen Alvarez was biting her lip. In those signs Windy knew that things were not well with Rancho Los Robles, and he was not surprised.

Later, when Tia Dona had gone to her room, Windy came bluntly to the point with Carmen and Jim Tracey.

"How are things with Tia Dona?" he asked. "Did Carlos leave anything?"

Carmen smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "Windy, you knew Uncle Carlos as well as any man knew him," she said. "Can't you imagine how things are?"

"Pretty bad, eh?" Windy asked.

"If it hadn't been for Jimmy, here, she would have lost the place," Carmen said. Tracey squirmed uncomfortably and Windy changed his opinion of the man some.

"She can't run cattle, that's a cinch," Tracey said. "Sub-dividing is the only thing. There'll come a time when the whole San Fernando Valley will be broken up, if they get the water. They've already started over around the Mission."

"Sub-dividing?" Windy asked. It was a new word to him. Outside of the talk he had heard in Calabasas, and the few facts he had picked up from Cord Vanery, this business of cutting land up into twenty-acre garden plots was just so much crazy California conversation.

"Jimmy has got most of the survey done already," Carmen explained. "All except the north end in the hills. Mr. Vanery is taking care of that. But it's the way Jimmy has figured out how to keep supplying the other ranches with water and still have enough for the subdivision that makes it worth while. Mr. Vanery says with the water supply we have we can expect plenty from—"

She had used the name twice, so it couldn't be a mistake. It struck Windy like a knife between the shoulders. "Vanery?" he said, leaning forward. Then realizing he would find out more by keeping quiet he asked, "Who is he?"

"Cord Vanery," Carmen Alvarez said. "He has handled a lot of big subdivisions here in southern California. He's helping us go ahead and put this thing over for Tia Dona."

Windy was cagey. "This Vanery," he said

slowly, "is he all right? I mean, can you trust him?"

"He knows his business," Jim Tracey said. "As for trusting him, I'm handling most of the surveys myself. The point is, Vanery has the money and we haven't. We've got to take what we can get and be satisfied."

"It really isn't bad," Carmen Alvarez said. Then, as an afterthought: "Mr. Vanery can explain it all to you, Windy. He'll be over in the morning. You should talk to him."

"Yeah," Windy McCloud said softly, a queer feeling running up the back of his neck. "In the morning, eh?"

And before he went to bed that night he called Jim Tracey aside long enough to ask him where he could get hold of a .44. By way of explanation he told the young surveyor he felt undressed when he wasn't packing one. To himself he admitted it was a form of undress he didn't want to be caught with if he were going to see Cord Vanery in the morning.

CHAPTER THREE

"The Charge Is Armed Robbery!"

VANERY and the big-bellied Hatch arrived at nine. Windy, the old familiar sag of a gun at his belt, met them at the corral. At the sight of him Hatch made a wild claw for his gun, but Vanery stopped him. The promoter leaned across his saddle, smiled down in that exasperating, confident way he had and said, "Well, McCloud, we meet again. I heard you had met with an accident."

"Yeah, I did," Windy drawled. "But the smell of skunk was so strong I came to. Glad to see you, Vanery. There's a little matter of ten thousand dollars I wanted to take up with you."

"Oh?" Cord Vanery said. "What do you intend to do about it?"

"Take it away from you like you took it from me, I reckon," Windy said.

"I wouldn't advise trying it," Vanery said. "There's a constable back in Calabasas looking for you now. We don't like card sharps in our town." He swung out of the saddle, turning his back to Windy. Hatch kept his hand on his gun-butt.

There was, Windy figured, only one way to handle a man like Vanery. Take him by the neck and beat his face in, taking his chances with that .45 Hatch was nursing. He started around the horse toward Vanery when he saw Carmen Alvarez running toward them, waving. Windy tried to get the knots out of his muscles and the tightness out of his stomach before the girl got there. Cord Vanery was the better actor. He bowed low and greeted her warmly. Carmen's eyes were bright.

"This is Windy McCloud, Mr. Vanery," Carmen introduced them. "Windy is our closest friend and I want you to consider him one of the family. I'm so anxious to have you tell him our plans."

"Well, Mr. McCloud," Vanery said. "I'm certainly happy to make your acquaintance. I'll be glad to tell you anything I can about our plans here." His eyes caught Windy's in an open challenge. "I believe Mrs. Alvarez stands to make a lot of money if everything goes right," he said. "It would be a shame if anything happened to upset her. Anything in particular you wanted to know, Mr. McCloud?"

"I'll look around first," Windy said evenly. "I'll ask questions later."

Carmen laughed. "That's wonderful," she said. "I can see you two will get along all right."

"Sure," Windy said dryly. "I get along with everyone."

He went to the corral and saddled his sorrel. He got the general lay of the ranch from an old Mexican puttering around the barn, then headed into the hills, following the creek winding through the valley.

Cord Vanery, Windy had decided, was a smart man. His challenge hadn't missed fire with Windy. It was just another way of warning the lanky Pecos redhead that if he made a fuss about the ten thousand dollars he had won, Cord Vanery would toss a hot potato in his lap. The man was not above going to Dona Alvarez and telling her he couldn't go on with the deal because 'her twin' whom she loved so much had walked off with all the money in a crooked card game. That would be nice, Windy thought.

He did not try to fool himself into thinking that he could beat Vanery at his own game. Land deals, and especially subdivisions were out of Windy's line, for he had never been close enough to settling down to become interested in land as anything more than something that grew grass to feed cattle.

But he did know cattle and he did know range, and looking over the live oak country about him and appraising the stand of wild oat and filaree flats, he found it good. The idea began to grow in his mind that maybe, with proper supervision, there would be no need to subdivide the Rancho Los Robles. And along that line there was Carmen. Maybe settling down wouldn't be so bad. Of course, if they made a cattle ranch out of the place there wouldn't be need of a surveyor like Jim Tracey.

BY THE time he had ridden an hour he was surprised he hadn't met the main herd. So far he had seen but one scrawny cow that looked as though it hadn't eaten for a month.

He cut over a ridge down into another valley. Here he found that of the thousand head of white faces Tia Dona had spoken of there was now a total of ten gaunt cows. A frown crossed Windy's forehead as he paused to cock his leg around the saddle horn and roll himself a cigarette.

Something funny was going on here. Windy had ridden enough range to know cow sign when he saw it. This range hadn't seen a cow in a month. Either old Carlos didn't know what he was talking about or the stock had wandered off or been driven off. He decided to check as to whether the place was fenced. Tia Dona's cows might be in Santa Barbara by now if it weren't.

Toward noon he headed north to the crags that the old Mexican had pointed out as marking the north boundry of the ranch. And along the rim of the valley he followed he found a three-strand fence in normally good repair. This side, then, was fenced.

He followed the fence for a mile to where it cut down toward the narrows through which the creek flowed. Here he found more recent sign of cattle movements, but what was more interesting he found sign that told him a chuck wagon had camped here. Tia Dona had said there hadn't been a round-up of stock since Carlos had taken the rancho. He got down off his horse and started to examine the ground when he heard an explosion up the canyon, toward the north boundary. Mounting his horse, he rode through the narrows.

Another fence cut in here, convincing him that the rancho was closed in. From here on a fence was needless, as the sandstone cliffs rose straight up for a hundred feet on either side of the valley. He stopped suddenly, positive he had heard the distant sound of wagons.

Windy pushed his horse into a jogging trot up the valley. There was a good stand of grass here and the stream widened in some places to thirty or forty feet and carried a good head of water, considering the dryness of the season. The valley narrowed again until it was no more than a slit between the sandstone cliffs, confining the water to a rushing mountain stream that tumbled over the smooth boulders. He stopped to listen for the wagon sounds again and there was a buzz like an angry bee close to his cheek. Then came the flat crack of a rifle.

Not waiting to spot the rifleman, he wheeled the startled sorrel and hit for the cover of a rock outcropping. Twice, more bullets fanned close to him. Someone didn't want company there in the gorge, and from his position on the cliff the rifleman was in a spot to enforce his wishes. Windy figured, sensibly, that he wouldn't be much good dead so he headed back down the valley in the direction of the ranch. He wanted a few answers.

It was late when he got back, but Cord Vanery and Hatch were still there, just getting ready to leave. Tia Dona was out telling them good-bye, and Jim Tracey and Carmen were standing close. Tia Dona seemed mighty pleased with the decisions of the day. She started babbling excitedly before Windy had a chance to open his mouth.

"It is just like Carlos always say," Tia Dona said. "'When I need him most my twin always come,' he always say. You see how it is, Señor Vanery? We need more money. The way to get money is to sell the cows. Now Windy is here and he will round up the cows and we will have the money we want. You will see."

"That's fine, Mrs. Alvarez," Cord Vanery said, mounting. "I'm sure glad it's all working out for you. I'll go ahead with the arrangements of getting special stages to bring the people out here from Los Angeles and in about a month we'll start selling the property. We'll have a big fiesta like you planned and then we'll sell the lots."

"Suppose the cows don't bring as much as we figured?" Windy asked pointedly.

CORD VANERY'S black eyes held that same smouldering look Windy had seen across the card table. "Maybe I can raise the money," the land promoter said. "But I hate to do that. Naturally I'd have to take a bigger cut on the profits if I put up any more cash."

"Naturally," Windy McCloud said. He met Cord Vanery's gaze for a second then said, "You said I could ask you anything I wanted about this deal?"

"That's right," Vanery said. He had taken his right hand off the saddle horn and there was a strange, clipped tone to his voice.

"What's going on up there at the head of the upper valley?" Windy asked flatly. "I tried to see but somebody took a pot shot at me."

Vanery did not flick an eyelash. "I own some property next to the Alvarez place," he said. "I'm putting in a road."

"I didn't know that," Jim Tracey said quickly. "I thought there was already a road in there."

"There was," Cord Vanery said. "It wasn't wide enough."

"Was it wide enough to drive cows over?" Windy McCloud asked.

"Maybe it was," Cord Vanery said. "I don't know much about cows. That's your business, ain't it?"

"That's my business," Windy agreed.

"Stick to it," Cord Vanery advised, and this time there was no veiled threat in his voice. It was a wide open challenge. He turned his horse and he and Hatch rode down the lane back toward Calabasas.

Windy tried to pretend everything was all right, but the uncomfortable feeling of trouble was around the house and Windy was glad when the long evening was over. He had tried to brush off questions about being shot at by saying it was probably a hunter, and to questions about the cattle Windy assured Tia Dona and Carmen that everything was fine. But if those explanations went over with the women they failed to register with Jim Tracey, and later when Windy went to the bunkhouse he found Tracey waiting for him. The young surveyor did not waste words.

"All right, Windy," he said. "What are the real answers?"

Windy was gradually changing his opinion of Tracey, even though he still didn't like the way Carmen looked at the young surveyor. But Windy had never let an affair of the heart interfere with good sense, so he told Jim of his trip through the valley and of the fact that there was no stock on Rancho Los Robles. Jim stood there, cursing under his breath, but it was when Windy told of hearing the blasting that Jim Tracey's face lost a shade of color.

"That's it!" he said, snapping his fingers. "Water! Maybe Vanery did drive off the cows, Windy, but if he did it was just incidental. He's not after Rancho Los Robles and a few cows. He's after the whole north end of San Fernando Valley!"

That statement didn't make sense to McCloud, and he said so. But before Tracey could amplify on it their attention was drawn by the horseman coming up the lane. He was a short blocky man with a wide-brimmed hat slouched over his face. He rode close and they could see that he had a rifle resting easily in the crook of his arm. He shifted the gun across to where his right hand was curled around the stock, then said, "Which one of you is Windy McCloud?"

"That might be me," Windy admitted, keeping an eye on the rifle. "What's it to yuh?"

The stranger used the butt of the short barreled gun to flip back his coat, exposing a star. "I'm Jerome. Catch up your horse and come along, McCloud," he said then. "I got a warrant for you. And, if it's conversation you want, the charge is armed robbery. Cord Vanery says you took ten thousand dollars from him in a crooked game, then walked off with it at the point of your gun."

"Cord Vanery is a damn liar," Windy said softly.

"That ain't my business," Jerome shrugged. He worked the lever of the rifle and spat a stream of tobacco juice alongside his horse's neck. "My business is bringin' in a man if I got a warrant for him, and I sure as hell got one for you. Now get movin' and don't try nothin'. I ain't nearly as slow as I look."

CHAPTER FOUR

When Cowmen Ride

WINDY soon discovered that Jerome's bit of self-appraisal was no idle boast. The lawman seemed slovenly, but when Windy started figuring out ways to escape he found that actually the man's eyes and rifle muzzle were everywhere. Seeing that an open break was out of the question, Windy turned to his best weapon—conversation—but here, too, he drew a blank. The tinstar was as good at that as Windy was.

"Tell you how it is, son," the man said, spitting a long stream of juice. "I don't take sides in these here affairs. Fact is, I don't even like nobody. Cain't afford to in my business. Never know who yore next customer might be." He rode silently for a minute, his slouch hat-brim bobbing up and down with the motion of the horse. Then: "Play checkers?"

Here, thought Windy, is an opening. If the man is a real checker player. . . . "Checkers?" Windy said in simulated surprise. "Don't tell me you play checkers?"

"I asked the question," Jerome interrupted. "Helps pass the time if you play checkers. Outside of that it ain't nothin' to me. If they turn you lose, it's all right. That's up to the judge. If they hang you . . ." He shrugged. "That's fine too. Few hangin's give a man's jail a reputation of sorts. I had three hangin's out of mine but they weren't none of them legal. Legal ones they take to Los Angeles, and them folks not even with a gallows. Borrowed one from Santa Barbara last time. Us, now, we got a tree right there in the road."

Windy was getting a little sick of this particular brand of talk and he said so.

The constable shrugged. "You started it," he said. "I always try to oblige."

Now that Windy had indicated he had enough of talk, Jerome went along with the suggestion and they made the rest of the trip to Calabasas in complete silence, which gave Windy a chance to think. His first reaction, now that he could put things together, was that Tia Dona should have stayed in the mud shack in New Mexico. She and Carlos had been perfectly happy with nothing. They had no business inheriting a California rancho in the first place.

But the thought of all that range going to waste while Cord Vanery enjoyed the proceeds of a fine herd of blooded stock rankled him more and more, and he knew that he would have to do something about it. As for the water war Jim Tracey had hinted of—well, that was Jim Tracey's business. And that started him thinking of Carmen and he suddenly realized that half his concern was over what Carmen would say about him being a jail

bird. She had smiled right pretty at him there toward the last. He wondered if perhaps he would have a chance to take one good poke at Cord Vanery's chin. That possibility grew when the lawman locked him in his cell. Cord Vanery was there to see the ceremony.

If Vanery had been cock-sure and arrogant before, he was twice as much so now. He laughed openly when Windy tried to edge close to him and got Jerome's rifle jabbed against his back.

As the cell door closed Vanery said, "Nice work, Constable. Thanks a lot."

The lawman appraised him coldly. "I ain't doin' you no favor, Vanery," he said. "I had a warrant and I served it. If the warrant was fer you I'd do the same. Now go on and leave the prisoner alone."

"Let him stay if he wants," Windy offered. "I'd like to talk to him."

"That's right friendly of you," Vanery said, smiling.

Jerome shrugged and went out, slamming the front door behind him.

Vanery pulled up a bentwood chair and sat down close to Windy's cell door. He fished a cigar out of his pocket, lighted it, then tilting back in the chair he hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and leisurely blew a cloud of smoke toward the low ceiling.

"Well, McCloud," he said, "how do you stand now?"

"About the same," Windy said. "I still think a man who can't afford to lose shouldn't play cards."

"Oh, I can afford to lose, all right," Cord Vanery said, rocking back on the hind legs of the chair. "But why should I? Now if you had picked yourself up fifty dollars or so . . . But why should I lose ten thousand dollars to a stranger?"

"Suppose I forget the whole thing," Windy suggested.

That brought a long laugh from Card Vanery. "You're hardly in a position to make bargains, are you, McCloud?" he taunted. He shook his head. "No. If you had kept on riding that would have been it. But you're too snoopy for your own good."

"You didn't like me findin' out you was a rustler, that it?" Windy said.

Cord Vanery dropped his chair to the floor and leaned forward toward the cell door. "Windy, my boy," he said, "you're just a cheap piker. You think in terms of nickels and dimes. That's why I'm willing to dismiss all charges against you—you haven't sense enough to be dangerous. Give me your word you'll ride and keep riding and I'll see you're out of here by morning."

This was Cord Vanery, the land promoter, talking. He had something to sell and Windy intended to find out what it was, so he toyed along with the idea. He said, "How about that stock that belonged to Dona Alvarez?"

Vanery tilted back in his chair and sighed. "That's what I mean about you," he said. "Sure, I had my boys round up that stock and sell it. Why not? Was it being worked? I had to have money to put over this subdivision, didn't I? That was one way to get it."

"Why didn't you go to Dona Alvarez? She would have gone along with that idea."

"Why didn't I let you get away with ten thousand dollars?" Vanery asked smugly. He dropped his chair and leaned close. "McCloud, I'm big enough that I don't have to ask favors, and I plan to be bigger. You run along and forget things that don't concern you and we'll all be better off."

WINDY had been trying hard to control his temper. He took the lone four-bit piece out of his pocket and started tossing it in the air, catching it and tossing it again.

"Dona Alvarez is a friend of mine," he said softly. "Maybe that don't mean nothing to you."

"You're being a fool, McCloud," Vanery said, tilting back and drawing on his cigar. "Dona Alvarez will come out all right. She came here with nothing, didn't she? I'll buy her place and I'll pay her for it. What I think it's worth. Just like I'll buy up every other place here at the head of the valley. Whatever I give her will be more than she had to start with, and to my mind it's a fair deal. What's more, McCloud, it's all legal and there's nothing you can do about it except get a bullet through your gut if you get in my way."

Windy paced back and forth across his cell, tossing the four-bit piece. He stopped suddenly and said, "I don't savvy your deal, Vanery, but I'm tellin' you to go to hell!"

Cord Vanery dropped his chair to the floor. His black eyes were glittering and there was a smile of genuine pleasure on his thin face. "I figured that would be your answer, McCloud," he said, "and it's all right with me. Remember Hatch? He don't like the way you butted him in the belly and I promised him he could have you. If I had turned you out of here he might have missed you. This way he can't miss and it'll be more fun." Cord Vanery got to his feet suddenly, went to the front door. He gave a couple of sharp whistles.

Immediately the street of Calabasas took on a deep-throated rumble. Cord Vanery came back, sat down in the chair, and tilted back. He clicked his tongue against his teeth, shook his head from side to side and in mock pity said, "Too bad, McCloud. Too bad. Hatch has got a lot of friends in this town. He has a way of coaxing people to be friendly."

Windy McCloud had heard a lynch mob

forming before, and there was not much doubt about the clutter of sounds that was increasing out there on the street. The words of the constable came back to him: "I've had three hangin's out of my jail—none legal." His thoughts must have shown on his face, for Vanery was laughing.

"I figured all the angles, McCloud," Vanery said. "Even to the cattle. I figured if anyone *did* start snooping around they'd look for cows. Meanwhile I could get a dam across the creek, right under their noses. You know what that means, McCloud?

"No, you wouldn't," he said, answering his own question. "You've never seen this valley cake and split where there's no water. That's what makes property valuable out here, McCloud—water. And I'll have that. And the dam is on my own property, all legal. If the State starts bellyachin' about riparian rights . . ." He shrugged. "Take a year or so to go through the courts, I figure. By that time I'll have bought up what I want and then I'll say I'm sorry and cut the dam. Too bad you won't be alive to see the town of Cordville, McCloud. I figure it will be the biggest subdivision that ever hit Southern California."

Vanery was tilted back in his chair, contentment on his face as he made his brag while the lynch mob, invited by Hatch, increased its fury outside. Windy clutched the bars of his cell and felt the perspiration running in a steady stream down his back.

There were a couple of shots and a shout that might have come from the little lawman. Cord Vanery studied the ash on his cigar and rocked back and forth in his chair. Suddenly Windy stopped and forced himself to remain calm. He began tossing the four-bit piece and catching it, and as he did he edged closer to the door and Cord Vanery's tilted chair.

When he was close to the door he missed the catch and the coin rattled to the floor. Stooping over to pick it up Windy threw himself forward. His long arms snaked through the bars, caught the back leg of the chair and sent Cord Vanery sprawling. Before Vanery could recover himself Windy had him by the collar and was beating his head against the iron bars.

He didn't wait until Vanery was unconscious before going for that hide-out gun. As he snaked it free and thumbed back the hammer Cord Vanery rolled to his feet and stood there, panting, the blood from a cut on his forehead trickling down his cheek and dripping from his chin. His black eyes had taken on an almost green hue and when he spoke it was in a voice that Windy had not heard before.

"For that little stunt, McCloud," Cord Vanery said, "I'll pull the rope myself!"

There was a battering on the jail door now and a lot of shouting. Over it all came the voice of Jerome, and that was followed by a lull. Apparently Jerome carried enough weight to hold them off for a while, but past experience proved, by his own admission, that he couldn't prevent a lynching.

In the lull another voice cut in, piping and shrill. "Let me through! Cord Vanery is in there. I got to see Vanery!"

"We ain't gonna hurt Vanery," the deep gravel voice of Hatch bellowed. "We just want that card sharpin' gun-slinger." That was greeted by a roar of approval and another protest from Jerome.

The same piping voice yelled, "Hatch! Let me talk to you, Hatch! I got to see Vanery!" There was a muttering of voices, then a sharp silence, and the door of the jail opened.

A small, wiry man with a beard came bursting through, followed by the lawman. Jerome was backing in, his guns drawn as he faced the mob. The small man came running straight toward the cell and into the waiting gun of Windy McCloud.

"Let on I got this gun and I'll cut you down," Windy rasped. "State your business like nothing was wrong and then call Jerome over." The little man looked wild-eyed at Cord Vanery, and Vanery shrugged his shoulders.

In a voice that cracked with excitement the little man said, "I just come from the narrows. That damn Jim Tracey found out about the dam. He's rounded up all the ranchers in the north end and they're headin' there to blow it up. We ain't got enough men there to stop 'em, Cord!"

For the first time since he had known him Windy saw Cord Vanery lose his composure. But it was only for a second. In a voice that was barely audible he said, "Make a break for the door. Get Hatch and eight or ten of the boys. Follow Tracey and the ranchers and trap them in the narrows."

"Stay where you are," Windy snapped. "Remember I got this gun." With the speed of a striking snake Cord Vanery whirled and threw his weight against Windy's arm. The gun roared and the little man squealed as he hit the door at full tilt, unharmed. Windy jerked the gun free, raised his arm and chopped down. Vanery fell without a sound as Jerome jerked around and leveled both his guns towards Windy's cell.

CHAPTER FIVE

Silence in the Narrows

IF WINDY McCLOUD had ever been called upon to use his power of conversation, it was now. Outside, the deep gravelly voice of Hatch was bellowing orders. Coming slowly

toward the cell was Jerome, both guns cocked. Windy stuffed his own gun in his belt and raised his hands. He did his best to force a grin.

"It's all right, Jerome," he said, trying to keep his voice calm. "I'm with you. I'm a deputy United States marshal sent here to investigate Cord Vanery. Let me out and you and me will clean this thing up in no time."

Jerome kept walking forward.

Windy tried a new tack. "There'll be hell to pay if you leave me locked up here while those ranchers get killed off," he said. "Vanery has a dam building across the creek and he aims to shut off the water to this end of the valley."

Jerome hesitated. "Don't believe you," he said, and continued his pacing.

"Go on outside and see," Windy pleaded. "Hatch is getting a bunch together to dry-gulch Jim Tracey and the ranchers."

"You'd like to have me leave, wouldn't you?" Jerome said.

Windy fished his gun out, barrel first, working it under his belt. He scooted it across the floor. "There you are," he said. "Now will you believe me? I'm a U. S. marshal, I tell you The government will hang you if you don't let me out."

The constable chewed reflectively, but he did not lower his guns.

"What have you got to lose?" Windy reasoned. "You can go with me and keep a gun on me all the way, if you want! Think what will happen next election if you let those ranchers get trapped by Hatch and his men!"

Windy wasn't sure which one of the arguments appealed, but one did. Jerome holstered one gun and took a key from his pocket. Unsnapping the lock he kicked the door open. Jabbing his gun in Windy's back he motioned toward a back door. "That way," he ordered, "and if this is a trick it will be the tenth time I've brought a man in feet first."

The commotion in front of the jail let them hit leather and make their escape, but as they rode out the north end of town they saw Hatch and ten men a half mile in front of them. Windy called back over his shoulder to Jerome, who was riding slouched in the saddle, a short-barreled carbine in his hands. "Does that convince you, Constable?"

"Nope," the constable said. "Keep ridin'."

It took a lot of coaxing to talk Jerome into stopping in at Rancho Los Robles, but Windy finally won out. As the horses slid to a stop in the barnyard Carmen and old Tia Dona came running out to greet them. Tia Dona was wringing her hands and crying, but Carmen was dry-eyed and tight-lipped. She threw her arms around Windy and sobbed against his chest.

"Tell Jerome what you know," Windy demanded. "Tell him I'm a U. S. marshal!" He gripped her arms until he knew he must be hurting her, but she got his signal and told the lawman of how Jim Tracey had found the dam, how he had been wounded while there. And here her voice broke for the first time. Windy felt a tight lump forming in the pit of his stomach.

"Six of the ranchers have gone there," she explained. "You know them, Jerome. Morley. Gonzales. McHugh. Carrillo. Bassett. Morales."

Her naming the men seemed to be the clinching argument with Jerome. "Get the marshal a gun," he said dryly. "We got to be movin' along!"

It was Carmen who brought the six-shooter and rifle and when she gave them to Windy she stood on tip-toe and kissed him on the mouth. "Please look out for Jimmy," she said. Then: "I love you. . . ."

AND that was all, but it was enough to tell Windy McCloud that there weren't enough men in California to stop him tonight. She loved him. She had said so. His thoughts were a strange mixture of wiping out Cord Vanery and his gang and visions of a rolling rancho with white-faced cows standing knee-deep in mountain water.

They caught sight of Hatch and his gang cutting in from the Camino, heading for the narrow valley. And at the same time they heard the first gunfire. Windy McCloud cursed bitterly. They were too late. Jim Tracey and the ranchers were already in the gorge and they would be trapped between two fires. Jerome sank his spurs and followed Windy straight toward the rear of Hatch's gang.

Pushing deep into the gorge, Windy saw for the first time the white wings of the dam reaching out from either wall. There was an opening in the middle waiting for the proper time before Cord Vanery gave the orders to close it. On top of the south wing of the dam Windy could see three or four forms and the flashes of rifle fire. The ranchers were handling this end of it all right, but when Hatch and his men opened up he saw Jim Tracey and his ranchers break wildly and scramble for cover. Unlimbering their rifles, Windy and Jerome started the rear attack.

A couple of horses went down, and as Hatch and his gang turned to meet this new attack it gave Jim Tracey time to get his men spotted. The fire from the top of the dam was renewed then, and Windy realized that in seeking new protection Tracey had exposed himself to direct gunfire from above.

He could see Tracey stagger out in the open, falter, then go down, and Carmen's words came back to him. "Take care of Jimmy." Jerking his six-shooter free, Windy threw

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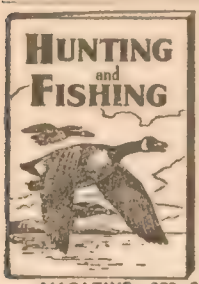

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himself from his horse and started working his way toward where Hatch and his men were re-assembling their forces.

Coming out from behind a rock, Windy ran headlong into one of the Hatch men crouched there. He did not waste a shot but brought his gun down with a sickening crunch and the man sprawled out on the ground.

Standing up, Windy could see Jim Tracey farther up the draw. The young surveyor was on his feet again and he had a big can in his hands and a coil of fuse looped over his arm. He was making a run toward the base of the dam and Windy could see the bullets from the men above striking fire from the rocks around him. Windy came out in the open, trying to cover Tracey.

Jerome, meanwhile, was taking a deliberate toll with his short-barreled rifle, and it gave Windy a chance to work around to where he could draw a bead on some of the attackers. His fire turned them and accounted for two, and the ranchers, quick to take up the advantage, sliced a withering fire into their ranks until Hatch and his men broke for new cover. Hatch himself made a run straight for the rocks that concealed Windy, and the lanky Texan went out to meet him.

The paunchy Hatch was within ten feet before he seemed to become fully aware that it was not one of his own men standing there in front of him. He gave a bellow and rolled to one side, bringing up both guns as he did. There was a crash and a smell of powder and as Windy felt lead tug at his clothes he aimed between those twin points of flame and fired. Hatch turned and started walking away. He took two steps before he fell.

There were frantic yells now from the men on the dam. Working around to where he could see, Windy spotted Jim Tracey touching a match to a fuse. The match sputtered and went out and Jim's body jerked convulsively, but the shower of sparks told that the fuse was burning.

For a few breathless seconds Windy waited for Jim Tracey to crawl away from the planted powder, then, seeing no movement, he made a run straight into the center of Cord Vanery's men.

Their surprise carried him through the first few yards of his run, then they cut loose and every bullet in their guns was tagged with the name of Windy McCloud. It was the one in the leg that hurt most, but there ahead of him Jim Tracey was huddled under the brow of the dam as the fuse sputtered its way toward destruction. Windy brushed off the fire in his shoulder as if it had been a bee sting.

He reached Jim Tracey, saw that he was still alive. Half lifting, half dragging, he got

the surveyor back under a cliff a few yards away from the dam and then the explosion knocked him flat and the rock and debris rained down around them in a never-ending shower. When it was over there was silence in the narrows.

CHAPTER SIX

Trail That Never Ends

IT WAS Jerome who found them and removed the rock pinning Windy's leg. Once free, Windy got to his feet and found that he could move around. The bullet in his leg had cut along the fleshy part of his thigh and was doing a lot of bleeding, but he could still walk.

Two ranchers were dead. The others, armed by the knowledge that the dam was going to blow, had been able to get to a point where they could round up the remaining Vanery men as they scattered away from the impending explosion. A shudder ran through Windy as he looked at the ruined dam and calculated the fate of the riflemen that had guarded it. He made sure Jim Tracey would be all right, then limped off to look for his horse. Jerome stopped him.

"I still got a warrant for you, McCloud," Jerome said, but his voice betrayed the fact that he said it because he could think of nothing else.

Windy grinned down at him. "Give it to me," Windy said. "I'll let Vanery serve it in person."

Jim Tracey heard and started to protest. "It's no use, Windy. Vanery will be fifty miles from here by now. Even if you did find him you're in no shape—"

"My right arm is all right," Windy said tightly. "Vanery thinks too much of money to clear out until he knows how things stand. I got to see him on a personal matter." And before anyone could stop him the lanky redhead was in the saddle and headed back down the canyon.

By the time he got to Calabasas there was some doubt in his mind as to whether or not he could go through with the thing he had started. The wound in his leg was beginning to be a real worry and there was a burning sensation in his shoulder that kept him hitching his head to one side. But as he had told Jim, his right arm was all right and he felt able to match it against Cord Vanery's hideout gun.

Not once did it occur to him that Vanery might have made a run for it. In playing cards with the man, and later in that strange arrogant conversation at the jail, Windy had

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gotten a line on Vanery that told him here was a man who would play the last chip.

The street was deserted except for one or two men who peered furtively around store porch posts when Windy rode in. To his questions as to the location of Vanery's office they gave a reply in the form of a thumb jerked toward a two-story building across the street from the saloon. Windy tried his gun in his holster when he saw the light from the second-story window.

He took off his spurs before crossing the board porch, then, gun in hand, he entered the darkened building and felt his way toward the stairs. The stairs were old and dried from the valley heat. They creaked with every step. A sliver of light showed from under the door at the top. It went out suddenly. Windy climbed on, and standing to one side he pushed open the door with his foot. There was dead silence.

"All right, Vanery," Windy said softly. "It's all over. I've come for you. Want to go out walking?"

"Come and get me, McCloud," Cord Vanery's voice said from the darkness.

For a long time there was only the audible breathing of the two men in that darkened room, then Windy reached out with his foot and kicked the door. There was a flash of light and the roar of a gun as Cord Vanery took the bait.

It took perhaps seconds, Windy never knew. It seemed to be one constant roar of guns as both men fired at the flashing spears of light, and the room was thick with smoke. Windy shot again, and the hammer clicked against a spent shell. He stood there for a while, waiting for Vanery's voice. There was no sound. He moved slowly into the room and found the lamp on the table.

The yellow flame showed Vanery's riddled body sprawled on the floor, the gun still in his hand. There was a small safe, its door ajar. A stack of bound currency lay on the table. Slowly Windy counted out ten thousand, one hundred dollars. He stuffed it in his pocket and walked back down the stairs. He was out on the street before he fell.

LYING in bed so long was a new experience to Windy McCloud. The way Tia Dona fussed around made it worse. The only thing to break the monotony was the unexpected visit from Jerome.

The little lawman said he was right proud of the number of prisoners he had in his jail, but he also said he had official business with Windy McCloud. "It's about you bein' a U. S. marshal," the constable explained. "I ain't never seen no U.S. marshal credentials.

I'd sure admire to take a look at yours."

Windy grinned his best grin. "Did I say that I was a marshal?" he asked innocently. "Must have been thinkin' of a friend of mine. Now this friend of mine back there in Texas —"

"That's what I was afraid of," Jerome interrupted.

Windy scratched his head. This man was hard to reason with.

"Sure hate to do it, Windy," the lawman said. "Sure do. Impersonatin' a gov'mint officer. Wish I could figger out a way to let you go. I'm plumb overcrowded in the jail as it is."

He and Windy thought a long time. Finally Windy snapped his fingers. "I got it," he said. The contable's eyes showed mild interest. "Have you got a warrant that comes right out and charges me with impersonating a United States marshal?"

"No, I ain't, I guess," Jerome said, thinking it over. "Reckon I need one?"

"You gotta have one," Windy assured him. "Why I know a feller got in all kinds of trouble. Same feller I was gonna tell you about, it was. Seems he started—"

"Charge dismissed," Jerome said. "I'd rather turn you loose than listen to you tryin' to convince me." He expelled his breath in a long sigh. "Sure a relief to my mind, too," he said. "I jest didn't have accommodations fer yuh." He shook hands before leaving and said, "Sure wish you was stickin' around, Windy. I'd like to find out if you sure enough play checkers."

Stick around, eh? Windy thought to himself. Guess Carmen hadn't told the folks yet. And that was the sunshine in Windy's life—Carmen. Watching her move around the room, bringing him his food, Windy knew that this time it was the real thing. The love bug had him.

Over and over in his mind he planned how he would ask her.. It should be simple. She had told him she loved him. But always the spectre of his old carefree drifting days rose up and sent a chill of apprehension down his spine. And then there was the matter of Jim Tracey.

The young surveyor seemed to be made of iron, for although his wounds had been worse, he was up a week before Windy could stir. He came in then and brought the ranchers with him. Windy's joy at the prospect of talking about cows faded when he found they all ran sheep.

"Sure," Carrillo explained. "Eet was all right when the mines were good. We drove the cows to San Francisco and they brought a good price. But that is gone. Is sheep,

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now, Mr. McCloud, and Rancho Los Robles can be the best sheep ranch in Southern California."

That left somewhat of a sour taste in Windy's mouth until he reconciled himself to the fact that with Carmen he could stand even sheep. And then the opportunity came when he was alone with her. She had leaned over to straighten his pillow and he put his arms around her and drew her close.

"I never thought I'd settle down," he said awkardly. "Especially not on a sheep ranch."

"Windy!" She said it as if she were startled. Windy figured all girls acted that way when the man they loved proposed to them.

"That's all right, honey," he said softly. "We'll talk about it later."

And he said nothing more until the day he had been up long enough to be able to ride. Then he went to look for her.

Coming around the corner of the bunkhouse he saw Carmen and Jim Tracey sitting on the bench under the apple tree. Carmen had her head on Jim's shoulder, and she was crying softly. Windy couldn't help overhearing what she said.

"Jimmy, darling, I don't know what to do," she sobbed. "I must have said something to make him misunderstand. He's so sweet and we owe him so much. I wouldn't hurt him for anything in the world." She pushed herself away suddenly and said, "Why, darling, he's more like a father to me!"

Windy McCloud stood there, swallowing the lump that kept forming in his throat. After a while he got himself together well enough to walk on. He stopped in mock surprise when he saw them, and Carmen sat up straight, brushing the tears away from her eyes. Windy fished into his pocket and brought out the roll of bills he had taken from Cord Vanery's office.

"Now listen to me, you two, and don't interrupt," he said huskily. "I ain't had a chance to talk as much as I wanted to ever since I been here. This time I'm gonna do it." He could see the worried look in Carmen's eyes, and he hurried on.

"I been talkin' to some of the ranchers, see? This is a good sheep ranch and here's enough money to stock it. The money belongs to Tia Dona, because Vanery got it selling off her cows. Jim Tracey, as I see it, you don't amount to a hell of a lot but even a blockhead can run sheep. You stay here and manage the place for Tia Dona and let those Los Angeles highbinders subdivide the other end of the valley."

He stopped suddenly, wiped his prominent nose on a blue bandanna and stuck out his

hand. Gripping Jim Tracey's warmly, he said, "You'll make a right good sheepman, Jim." He turned abruptly and started to walk away, then he stopped. Looking back, he said, "And Carmen—with a little training, he'll make a right good husband."

He went straight to the corral, not even stopping to say good-bye to Tia Dona. She'd just make a fuss, and Windy McCloud was in no mood to have a fuss made over him. He saddled quickly, wondering why it was his vision kept blurring. Been in bed too long, maybe. Wasn't good for a man. To grow, a man had to keep on the move. If a man ever settled down he was sunk.

He rode out on the dusty Camino and headed his horse toward Buenaventura. And as soon as the ranch was behind him he felt much better. He honked his nose loudly against the blue bandanna and started to sing in a sour off-key voice:

"My foot's in the stirrup,
My bridle's in my hand.
Oh Lily, fair Lily,
I'm headin' for a far and distant land."

He substituted Carmen for Lily and that fit all right, too. And as the rangy sorrel ate up the miles everything else became all right. The birds singing in the sumac sounded good and free. The breeze that came through the passes, sweet from the ocean, was cool. It made a man eager want to cross the next hill.

Windy McCloud heaved a big sigh as he fingered the hundred dollars still in his pocket. "Maybe I should have bought them a wedding present," he thought. Then, grinning to himself: "I'll jest save it in case they name the first one Windy!"

He broke into a laugh as he rode along the winding, dusty trail. . . .

THE END

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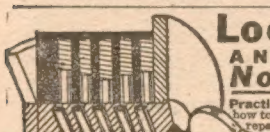

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(Continued from page 62)

His slug plucks at my shirt as it passes between my arm an' my body. I drop the hammer an' Matt doubles, hit in the belly. He goes down with a great ragin' cry, triggerin' wildly—three quick shots that dust the ground.

In the barn Molly screams, an' yonder near the bunkhouse a heavy voice—Luke's—bellows, "Who's that woman?"

Molly shouts, "Luke. Luke, dear. Over here!"

From the house comes Sheriff Gabe Tennant's curses. "That hot damned Tensleep. He's one of them that slipped out on us. Watch out, Luke. That snake would as soon shoot a man as look at him. He's no damn good, I tell yuh!"

Charley, blendin' with the shadows in the stable, says: "Hear that, feller? Raise a dust an' leave it behind you. Until we can thank you, remember we ain't forgettin'. If ever you need friends, think of Arrow S. Good-bye, son, an' easy trails."

"Look after Molly," I tell him, an' swing up an' hit Zebra hawss a smash with the hooks.

Luke, clankin' across the yard, hollers: "Hey! Who's that?" An' when I don't answer, he cracks a cap, sends a slug whinin' after me. But the damn bullet don't even come close to my hide.

Molly is cryin', "No, Luke, no! That's Mister Jones. He helped us in this fight and—"

"Jones?" Gabe Tennant bellers it. "That's that horsethief, Tensleep. Gun him, Luke! Gun him!"

Funny how bloodsweatin' these low-paid sheriffs can get when there's a bounty on the line. Luke don't fire again an' I rein Zebra behind the barn an' light out for the crick timber. There's a bob-wire fence in the way but my pony takes it like a bird an' smashes through the bottomland an' answers my rein to'rds the trail that leads over the Tecolotes. He's full of run an' I'm bankin' on Charley, Molly an' Luke frontin' for me an' at least delayin' the posse till I've got a safe lead. That's just one nice thing good friends can do for a feller.

The cool breeze smashes me in the face, soakin' up the softness left by a purty gal's tears. My blood's runnin' free an' my luck seems good enough to insure me livin' to be eighty, at least. The world is still a good place an' how can a feller get lonesome with two such fine companions ridin' at his stirrups—a good conscience an' a happy mind? Get along, Zebra pony.

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